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Narratives of Desperation: 'Genre, Gender, and  
*Desperate Housewives*

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Master of Arts

at the University of Otago, Dunedin

New Zealand

05/06/08

## I. Abstract

This thesis investigates the history of the term ‘desperation’ when applied to female film and television genres, before examining how the first series *Desperate Housewives* draws from and adds to this history. In addition this thesis considers the increasing importance of male characters to the ‘narrative of desperation’ and argues that in the case of *Desperate Housewives* their role is crucial.

The first two chapters provide a literature review. Chapter one looks at the history of the soap opera genre paying particular attention to its influence by the woman’s film, its appeal to female audiences, and its configuration as a women’s genre. Chapter two then collects together work on the narrative and visual representation of male characters in film and television to suggest how stereotypes have changed and theory has developed.

Chapters three and four consider the term ‘desperation’ both as an autonomous concept and in the context of *Desperate Housewives*. Chapter three attempts to define desperation and place it within the context of films made for female viewers, from *Now, Voyager* (1942), to *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), as well as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), and *Bridget Jones Dairy* (2001). With a ‘desperate realities’ and ‘desperate fantasies’ binary in mind, this chapter looks at what constitutes a narrative of desperation. Finally, chapter four inserts *Desperate Housewives* into the narrative of desperation and argues that increasingly this concept relies upon the inclusion of male characters as the heart of desire, victimization and suffering for female characters.

## **I. Acknowledgements**

There are many people I would like to thank for aiding me in the completion of this thesis. Thank you to Gabby for her friendship and constant support through the MA period. Our brainstorming sessions, caffeine fixes, and movie dates were always perfectly timed and much appreciated. Thank you to Margi and Pete – my neighbours in the postgraduate suite – for sharing with me their own frustrations and reminding me that we were all experiencing the same highs and lows. Thank you to Mum, Dad, Michael, Tim, and Dinah for constantly reminding me that I deserve it all. Most importantly, thank you to Dr. Cathy Fowler for her exceptional supervision – her support, her understanding, her honest and her belief in me and my project.

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It's an odd thing to look back down on the world, to watch those I left behind; each in her own way so brave, so determined, and so very desperate. Desperate to venture out, but afraid of what she'll miss when she goes. Desperate to get everything she wants, even when she's not exactly sure of what it is. Desperate for life to be perfect again, although she realizes it never really was. Desperate for a better future, if she can find a way to escape her past.

Mary-Alice Young [1:21]

## I. Introduction

The opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*, with its references to heterosexual relationships throughout history, indicates to viewers a narrative that is heavily embedded within a soap opera framework. The sequence offers a range of signifiers from which we can make immediate assumptions about the nature of the television series we are about to watch. For example, in a 'Garden-of-Eden-type' setup we see the quintessential male figure of Adam get crushed by an over-sized apple, connoting a female-oriented narrative whereby men feature as catalysts for acts of desperation. The following questions can then be asked, what constitutes a male/female genre? And have women's genres always accepted male protagonists and men's issues so readily? Through investigating the history of women's genres in film and television- soap opera, melodrama, and the woman's film- as well as themes of desperation, which have enveloped these genres, we can chart the growing inclusion and influence of male characters within female genres.

Although borrowing heavily from the soap opera genre, the originality of the *Desperate Housewives* narrative lies in the generic hybridity of its construction. From the exaggerated romantic rendezvous between Gabrielle Solis and John Roland, to the dark and mysterious liaisons between Paul Young and Mike Delfino, *Desperate Housewives* manages to effectively mould together elements from various film and television genres resulting in both an entertaining hybrid narrative and a range of complex characters that we can investigate. *Desperate Housewives* follows the lives of six women (four friends - Susan Mayer, Bree Van de Kamp, Lynette Scarvo and



Gabrielle Solis, one deceased narrator- Mary-Alice Young, and one ‘outsider’- Edie Britt), who are all presented as ‘desperate’ in their own ways.

The first character we are introduced to is Mary-Alice Young, who can be momentarily mistaken to be the show’s protagonist. Her initial representation as a loving mother and wife means we are stunned at her abrupt suicide. Suicide, as an act of sheer desperation, cements for us the key theme surrounding both soap opera and more specifically *Desperate Housewives*. The mystery surrounding Mary-Alice’s sudden death becomes the show’s central narrative element, and it is through her continuing omniscient narration that we experience the triumphs and tragedies of the show’s other characters. Her voice-over in the pilot episode begins,

An odd thing happens when we die. Our senses vanish. Taste, touch, smell, and sound become a distant memory. But our sight, ah, our sight expands, and we can suddenly see the world we’ve left behind so clearly. Of course, most of what’s visible to the dead could also be seen by the living. If they’d only take the time to look.

Mary-Alice Young [1:1]

Mary-Alice’s four best friends Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher), Lynette Scarvo (Felicity Huffman), Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross), and Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria), make up the show’s protagonist collective. The women are presented in two ways, firstly through their own mini-narratives whereby we witness the goings on in their individual lives, predominately behind closed doors, and secondly as a community, through cups of tea, weekly poker games, charity events, and dinner parties. Mary-

Alice introduces us to these four women as they arrive at her funeral, and immediately we can sense the stereotypical construction of this combination of characters. The stereotypes presented here are recognized as essential to soap opera as well as a narrative of desperation, an area that will be explored in chapter two. As suggested by Dorothy Hobson, “characters have to have the ability to appear to be real representations of real people and be recognizable for the individual characteristics and emotions which link them with our subjectivities” (2003, pp84-85). The characters in *Desperate Housewives* are constructed in a way that leaves room for empathy from a wide range of audiences. The show’s pilot episode acts as an introductory piece through the use of Mary-Alice Young’s omniscient narration, and cements for us a familiar soap opera style structure.

#### **i. Introducing the Characters**

Susan Mayer is constructed as the quintessential ‘single girl’. A recently divorced, single mother, Susan is presented as clumsy, disorganized, and extremely unlucky. In the opening sequence of the show Mary-Alice says of her friend, “It was common knowledge on Wisteria Lane that where Susan Mayer went bad luck was sure to follow. Her misfortunes ranged from the commonplace to the unusual to the truly bizarre” [1:1]. Throughout the narrative of *Desperate Housewives* we follow Susan as she faces a variety of challenging yet humorous obstacles as she strives for the romantic ideal. For Lynette Scarvo desperation is on the most part a result of her restriction as a stay-at-home-mum to four young children. Hobson says of the ‘mother figure’, “If there is one characteristic which encapsulates the representation of motherhood in soap operas, it is that their children are of paramount importance, the

concept of motherhood is seen as equality which gives women status and unites them, whatever faults they may have or whatever they may do” (pp92-93). Lynette’s desperation lies in the not-so-glamorous side of being a mother. She appears to resent her position as a sole home-maker and caregiver, and is constantly making references to ‘how life used to be’. Mary-Alice describes this sacrifice, “Lynette gave up her career to assume a new label: the incredibly satisfying role of full-time mother. Unfortunately for Lynette this new label frequently fell short of what was advertised” [1:1].

Whereas Lynette lives a life of chaos, Bree Van de Kamp personifies housewifely perfection. Although to outsiders she is presented as flawless in every aspect of her life, desperation for Bree lies in the actual disintegrating state of her marriage. Mary Alice comments on Bree’s character, “I remember the easy confidence of her smile, the gentle elegance of her hands, the refined warmth of her voice. But what I remember most about Bree was the look of fear in her eyes. Bree had started to realize her world was unraveling. And for a woman who despised loose ends, that was unacceptable” [1:1]. When it seems like both her husband and her children have turned against her, Bree remains strong and confident in an attempt to keep up appearances. Her strength of character is materialized through her willingness to try seeking marital therapy, to try engaging in new levels of intimacy, and to vent her frustrations through joining a gun club. She is willing to try anything to protect the appearance of her marriage from being tarnished.

Gabrielle Solis, an ex-runway-model, prides herself on her appearance. Throughout the series Gabrielle is presented as constantly alternating between her husband, the

powerful and wealthy Carlos Solis, and her teenage gardener, John Roland. Mary Alice describes Gabrielle's desperation, "I should have seen how unhappy she was. But I didn't. I only saw her clothes from Paris, and her platinum jewellery, and her brand new diamond watch. Had I looked closer, I'd have seen that Gabrielle was a drowning woman, desperately in search of a life raft. Luckily for her, she found one" [1:1].

Although provided for materially, Gabrielle is lonely. She is often framed alone inside or outside of her mansion, surrounded only by her possessions. Even after her husband is arrested, Gabrielle takes risks and often uses her confidence and powers of seduction to get what she wants, suggesting the same tactics to her suffering friends, "Oh for God's sake, Bree. You're a woman. Manipulate him. That's what we do" [1:3]!

These four women make up the bulk of the narrative of *Desperate Housewives*, and are presented as desperate from the season's pilot episode. It is important to recognize, however, that their desperation has a fundamental catalyst - men. Whether it is as husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, fathers, brothers, sons, or illicit lovers, the male characters in *Desperate Housewives* are the roots of all desperation for these four women and the women who surround them. Discussion of the male characters in *Desperate Housewives* is an area that, until now, has been commonly overlooked. Through looking at a range of films that fall under what I term a 'narrative of desperation', we can consider how men have contributed to female desperation over time, and how we can understand this catalytic effect in terms of a contemporary narrative such as *Desperate Housewives*.

## ii. Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is structured in two halves. The first chapters aim to establish the origins of both genre and gender through a selection of chronological literature. Chapter one focuses on key texts and looks at how each engages with soap opera's influence by melodrama and the woman's film, the appeal of soap opera to female audiences, and the configuration of soap opera as a women's genre. Using Muriel Cantor and Suzanne Pingree's early discussion of soap opera construction and conventions as a starting point, the chapter then investigates the work of Ien Ang, Christine Geraghty, Robert Allen, Charlotte Brunsdon, and Dorothy Hobson to understand both the consistencies present within the soap opera genre, as well as the changes the genre has faced since its establishment in the thirties.

With the critical field of soap opera fully established, the focus then turns to another genre intended primarily for women. Christine Gledhill draws our attention to the conventions of melodrama, with the 'woman's film' described by Mary-Ann Doane and Jeanine Basinger later in the thesis. Chapter two then investigates work on the place of male characters in film and television from both a narrative and a visual perspective. Joan Mellen provides a benchmark for discussion by outlining various narrative subject positions that are traditionally occupied by men in film. Stella Bruzzi builds on these notions and cements male subject positions within a more contemporary framework. Moving then to the visual representation of men, Steven Cohan, Richard Dyer, and Yvonne Tasker offer various re-interpretations of both the power and weakness associated with the male body as a onscreen spectacle. With the narrative and visual traits of masculinity established the focus then shifts to look at the

function of male characters within the realm of contemporary television preparing the way for both textual and visual analysis of the men in *Desperate Housewives*.

The second half of this thesis considers the term ‘desperation’ both as an autonomous concept and in the context of the show itself. Chapter three attempts to define desperation and places it within the context of the woman’s film, using *Now, Voyager* (1942), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) as case study examples. With a ‘desperate reality’ and ‘desperate fantasy’ in mind, I look at what constitutes a narrative of desperation, arguing that desperation in film and television does not exist without the inclusion of male characters as the heart of desire, victimization and suffering for females.

With a summary of the show’s pilot episode provided as an initial point of reference, chapter three addresses the sole academic collection dedicated to *Desperate Housewives* and notes the exclusion of discussion on male characters. With this exclusion in mind the chapter then focuses on a detailed textual analysis, looking at the representation of the men from both a visual perspective and in terms of their place in the narrative, thus locating them within a narrative of desperation.

## I. Chapter One

### Women's Genres: A Literature Review

*Desperate Housewives* follows the episodic pattern of a soap opera. One week the foremost storyline is Lynette Scarvo's difficulties with her boys while the next is Rex Van de Kamp's sadomasochism... The subject quickly becomes what is going on behind closed doors in the lives of Lynette, Gabrielle Solis, Susan Mayer and Bree Van de Kamp (the hidden desires, dissatisfactions and hatred festering underneath the wisteria) as much as it is the mystery of Mary Alice's suicide. As Mary Alice says at one point, 'Beneath the peaceful façade everyone has secrets and we need to think carefully before digging them up' (1:6).

(Coward 2006, p36)

A statement such as this aids in setting the scene for an academic discussion of soap opera. Spanning fifty years of existence and once the women's genre par excellence, soap opera is often considered the most durable of television genres. Equally with its predictable narrative structure and its well-established character types, soap opera is an increasingly popular area of theoretical study.

As a variety of my chosen texts will aptly show, a growing phenomenon in soap opera is the increasing rate at which male characters are emerging as sites of interest. It is this trend that has determined the focus of this thesis. Alongside this chosen parameter, American soap opera will be of primary focus, though brief attention will be paid to how its British counterpart has also been discussed in literature. Despite its increasing popularity the road to academic validation for soap opera has been a long one. It is interesting to note that a genre so often criticized as unworthy of critical attention twenty years ago is now in an age where a single season of a single show (Season One of *Desperate Housewives*) has an entire book devoted to it, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's co-edited collection *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence* (2006). This collection will be discussed further in chapter four. This chapter introduces a brief history of both the soap opera as a genre, and the range of academic writing devoted to it. The first half of the chapter will look specifically at the key texts, before moving into a discussion of soap opera trends and conventions.

### **i. Key Texts**

Perhaps the earliest credited work on the soap opera genre is that of Muriel G. Cantor and Suzanne Pingree who present a self-titled book *The Soap Opera* in 1983. Although lacking a more contemporary position, this book offers a valid starting point from which to begin to understand the history and early development of soap opera. Cantor and Pingree construct a clear and comprehensive picture of soap opera, beginning by tracing its historical origins. They discuss the soap opera industry and soap opera content, and attempt to define the key differences between 'daytime' and 'primetime' texts.



Describing the soap opera genre as “an integral part of American culture for over fifty years” (p54), Cantor and Pingree define the genre not so much by what *it is*, but more what *it is not*, by considering the soap opera in direct comparison to other television forms such as the comic serial with which its characteristics are commonly confused. Cantor and Pingree also outline themes and character types that have become familiarized in American soap opera over time. Six years later, in 1989, Ien Ang addresses the cooperative relationship between soap opera and the melodramatic premise; with specific reference to the long-running American show *Dallas*. Her book *Watching Dallas- Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* is based largely around audience research and looks closely at the idea of ‘prime-time’ soap opera in an attempt to understand the immense success of *Dallas*. Ang describes soap opera as having “rapidly developed into one of the most popular entertainment forms... characterized by an accent on human relations, domesticity and daily life” (p54)

Although focusing primarily on British soap opera, Christine Geraghty’s 1991 book *Women and Soap Opera- a Study of Prime Time Soaps* furthers Ang’s work on the soap opera audience, and looks at women as occupying a two-fold position within the soap opera genre: both as on-screen characters and as active audience members. This is the first major study of the role of women in soap operas. Building on the work of Charlotte Brunsdon (1986) and Tania Modleski (1991), Geraghty provides a comparative analysis of British and American soaps, and, while focusing primarily on textual analysis, looks at the relationship between onscreen narrative and the active soap opera audience. She then moves a step further and argues that prime-time soaps have stretched the boundaries of

the soap opera genre, and are now attracting “a less specifically female-dominated audience” (p39), an idea that essentially promotes the increasing importance of the male viewer, and therefore masculine themes and interests within this genre. An increase in the portrayal of issues faced by the male character on-screen acts as a means of identification for the male viewer. She offers the following question, “What is it about soaps that makes a male viewer assert, “It’s not manly to talk about soaps”” (p40) Geraghty proposes that the distinction between daytime and primetime soap opera lies primarily in differences in gender, both in terms of character make up and audience demographics. Primetime soap operas, she suggests, pay more attention to male characters, their relationships, and their careers. She makes reference to *Dallas* and suggests that, “while men appear to control much of the action in *Dallas*, their preferred position is a static one, in charge of a unified family and business. Structurally and unusually, the heart of the programmes is the men’s homes. This is the place where the idyll could be achieved if only everything (and particularly the women) would fall into place” (p66).

Whereas Christine Geraghty focuses on the gendered differences between prime time and daytime soap operas, Charlotte Brunsdon’s 1997 text *Screen Tastes- Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* pays particular attention to soap opera and the feminized sphere. With the male position becoming a more prominent area of study, Brunsdon reasserts a feminist position. Her book looks specifically at the genre from a feminist perspective, describing the way in which soap opera and other women’s genres (both intentionally and unintentionally) undervalue women. She says of this idea, “feminists have argued that dominant discourses in this culture are the ones which both devalue women and

repeatedly insist on the social power of sexual difference.” (p28) Brunsdon assumes two key positions with regard to these ideas. Firstly, she discusses the juxtaposition of the terms ‘feminists’ and ‘soap opera’, arguing that both connote different understandings of femininity, and secondly she reinforces the growing status of soap opera for audiences and critics alike, and acknowledges its growth as an area of academic study and attention. From here she defines soap opera as existing as a ‘women’s genre’, a term that up until this point has not been used by critics, and she goes on to outline the characteristics of soap opera that drive such a position.

Brunsdon, along with Julie D’Acci and Lynn Spiegel, edited a second book in 1997 entitled *Feminist Television Criticism - A Reader*. This text also assumes a feminist perspective, and, like Ien Ang’s work, discusses the interdependent relationship between soap opera and melodrama. Through the collaboration of various scholarly opinions, this book provides a comprehensive understanding of soap opera as a “feminine narrative form” (p36). Within this text Tania Modleski talks about what she terms “the soap formula” (p38), and looks closely at a variety of narrative elements that produce such patterns. Another prominent writer, Annette Kuhn, then stresses the narrative importance of “female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point of view” (p145), once again reinforcing a largely feminist position.

Dorothy Hobson’s book *Soap Opera* offers a more contemporary framework for soap opera. Moving away from a feminist perspective, Hobson, like Cantor and Pingree, traces the genre’s progression from American radio to the popular international television genre

it is known today. With an earlier publication *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* in 1983 focused for the most part on audience reception, Hobson's 2003 text argues that characters are the most important elements of soap opera. She poses a variety of questions: What are the main character types and how have they been represented? How have they evolved and changed? Why do we need the characters, what is their function and how do they work? (p82), thus reinforcing the universal appeal and accessibility of the soap opera genre. Having introduced the key texts for the study of soap opera, I will now examine some of the key issues in more detail.

In the literature surrounding soap opera as a genre, there appears to be little attention paid to forming a concrete definition, but rather a cluster of common techniques and themes are offered as repeatable formulae. Laura Stempel Mumford notes this exclusion in her book, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre*, and forms what she considers a practical definition:

A soap opera is a continuing fictional dramatic television program, presented in multiple serial installments each week, through a narrative composed over interlocking storylines that focus on the relationships within a specific community of characters.

(p18)

## ii. A Brief History

Soap opera as a genre began in the 1930s in the form of a radio broadcast. Credited as being less of a distraction for the audience for whom they were intended, radio soap operas were seen to “reflect the interests of the advertisers’ target audience” (Cantor and Pingree, 1983, p19). Radio soaps were sponsored, (as the name suggests), by companies specializing in the manufacturing of household cleaning products. In 1995 Robert Allen describes this phenomenon:

Characters in the soap opera have, quite literally, dirty secrets: dirty laundry, dirty floors, dirty toilets, dirty bodies, dirty appliances, dirty children, dirty homes- which require cleansing.

(p4)

He furthers this idea with the following statement:

One of the most common ways for a character to demonstrate his or her villainy is to obtain and threaten to disseminate some “dirt” about another character: his mistaken parentage, her previous lover, his extramarital liaison, her child given up for adoption.

(p4)

The first television soap opera was aired in 1947 and was titled '*A Woman to Remember*'.

In the absence of any scholarly account of this initiator the Internet Movie Database offers the following synopsis:

One of television's first daytime serial dramas (which soon moved to an early-evening slot), this was a creative serial-within-a-serial about the actors and crew on a fictitious radio soap opera, portraying both their behind-the-scenes and on-air interactions.

(author unknown, 2007)

Cantor and Pingree credit the introduction of the soap opera to another historical source—the domestic novel. The eighteenth century saw the production of a range of literature for women, stories encompassing themes and characters that offered particular enjoyment to female audiences, and is considered to have motivated the themes and characters of radio soap operas. Samuel Richardson's English novel *Pamela* (1740) is an accurate example of this with the similarities to American soap opera being very much evident here:

In *Pamela*, published in 1740 and considered by some to be the first modern novel, Samuel Richardson shows how a working “girl” (a house servant) struggles to act in accordance with her proper upbringing. After avoiding seduction, she marries her employer, a man with high social status. Although it is no longer

required that heroines avoid seduction, that story is repeated over and over again in women's fiction, including soap operas.

(p20)

As suggested in the previous literature review, soap operas are often considered unworthy of academic attention, due primarily to their name and the connotations attached, their content, and their target audience. The term connotes a lack of cultural and aesthetic worth and is thus susceptible to criticism.

### **iii. Critical Reception of Soap Opera**

Charlotte Brunsdon, in her co-edited 1997 *Feminist Television Criticism Reader*, highlights feminism's interest in soap opera, both in terms of its content and its various reactions. Her engagement with soap opera began in the 1970s, at a time when feminists were largely rejecting soap opera as a genre worthy of discussion. Soap opera was considered to be offering stereotypical and unrealistic images of women (Brunsdon, 1997, p26). Feminists have criticized two prominent stereotypes: women as sex objects and women as housewives, causing hostility and negative attitudes towards soap opera content and connotation. Brunsdon describes this rejection as "cultural contempt", or the negative view from those concerned with high culture.

Feminists were interested in soap opera only to the extent that they purveyed ideologies of femininity and family against which

feminism was defining itself. It was a combative interest, a commitment to knowing thine enemy.

(p38)

The late-70s saw a shift in opinion, largely due to both the revaluing of the genre and the emergence of strong and powerful female characters. This sparked a new found mindset whereby the genre was no longer considered “trashy”, but as having less of what Brunsdon describes as “cultural power”, or credibility among higher social groupings. Brunsdon poses the commonly debated question, “Why are feminists so interested in soap opera?” The answer lies firstly in the broad understanding that they are essentially women’s programs. She says of this phenomenon:

On the one hand, there is a perceived incompatibility between feminism and soap opera, but, on the other, it is arguably feminist interest that has transformed soap opera into a very fashionable field for academic inquiry.

(p36)

Women have been targeted by the makers of soap opera, women have been investigated as viewers of soap opera, and the genre is widely and popularly believed to be feminine.

(p38)



Defining soap opera as a text with an array of connotations and negativities attacking a feminist position, aids in setting the scene for the areas of structure, content and character that follow. A feminist perspective, whether for the soap opera mould or against it, provides a base for further academic investigation.

With such a firmly embedded target audience comes the need for a familiar and easily repeated structure, and the soap opera is no exception. Soap operas are structured in a way making them accessible for the traditionally typified “house-bound woman”. With long-established soap opera conventions in mind, we can then move to look at the ways in which the focus of this thesis, *Desperate Housewives*, both adheres to and subverts these standards. The narrative structure of *Desperate Housewives* aligns closely with the conventions of primetime soap opera that Christine Geraghty describes. With a storyline that extends well beyond the domestic sphere, *Desperate Housewives*, like the other primetime examples Geraghty discusses, shows “dependence on action and resolution rather than soap-oriented narrative strategies of commentary and repetition” (1991: p169).

#### **iv. Soap Opera Structure**

##### ***Continuous Storyline***

The structure of a soap opera has little potential for deviation. Common formulae have stemmed from the radio soap opera and remain somewhat static today. Cantor and Pingree describe the structural consistencies of soap opera as existing under three key areas of understanding: the lack of narrative closure, the slow pace of soap operas, and

the paucity of action. The soap opera genre advertises itself as having a continuous storyline, or what Ien Ang describes in 1989 as “a continuous coming and going of mini narratives” (p57). An individual show will be based primarily upon a continuing story, with a variety of plot lines that vary in central focus as the narrative progresses. The plots develop at differing speeds so that conflict resolution is seemingly impossible. Cantor and Pingree say of this technique:

“The completion of one story generally leads to others, and on-going plots often incorporate parts of semi-resolved conflicts” (1989, p23) Ien Ang builds on this, suggesting that “each episode of a soap consists of various narratives running parallel. In every episode one of these narratives gets most emphasis, but the others keep simmering” (1989, p56).

### ***Slow Pace***

Soap opera as a television genre is renowned for its slow pace. Slow pace by definition here refers to the time taken to reveal information and essentially tell the story. This can be compared to the feature film narrative, whereby a story (introduction, turning points and conclusion), can be resolved in, on average, 95 minutes. Cantor and Pingree consider the slower rate of narrative unveiling to be intended, originally, to suit the needs of women at home. Creators of soap opera recognized the pressures of everyday life that women were facing and so made the plots of soap opera easily accessible so viewers could keep up with the story, whilst partaking in other activities. Techniques such as the use of flashback and repetitious dialogue are among those aiding this deliberate narrative

structure. Cantor and Pingree acknowledge the prime-time soap opera as being vastly more rapid in pace.

### ***Paucity of Action***

The third commonly acknowledged structural technique of soap opera is the paucity of action (Cantor and Pingree 1983, p24): the idea that what happens in soap opera is usually told through conversation rather than the portrayal of events. Where a traditional film narrative for women would include action in conjunction with conversation (for example Bridget's sky-diving fiasco in the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*), a soap opera would be more likely to reveal action through thought-provoking dialogue or gossip between characters. Whereas structural techniques acknowledge the external form of the soap opera, common themes and content are important to understand the internal elements of the genre. Cantor and Pingree believe that the secret to soap opera content lies in its anticipated viewer:

“The content of soap opera reflects its intended audience. The stories are women's stories, focusing on love, romance, childbearing, health and illness, manners and morals (1983, p28). Although lacking a more contemporary argument, Cantor and Pingree's base definitions for soap opera can be readily applied to a more current context. The following statement, written in 1983, can be easily mapped onto a variety of soap operas or series' heavily influenced by soap opera that are broadcast today:

The stories are a fictionalized representation of our social structure and social relations are presented. These representations provide a mirror on the world, showing how power is allocated in society and how dominance and submission are idealized. They are at best a stylized representation of the real world and, at worst, reflect the continuing inequalities and disparities between races, classes, and the sexes in American society.

(pp69-70)

### ***Characters***

Characters are a soap opera's main strength, and play a crucial role in constructing content. Creator of *Desperate Housewives*, Marc Cherry, sets the scene for character discussion with his creation of protagonist Lynette Scarvo:

I came up with the character of Lynette first. I wanted to write a career woman who had given up her career so she could raise kids because she wanted to do right by them, and now she's not happy, I thought that was, in its own little way, groundbreaking. In America we make it seem like to be a stay-at-home mom must be so fulfilling. For a woman to say, "No, this is hard, and I don't really like it," I thought was a brave choice. To make sure that the audience sympathized with Lynette, I made her

kids complete nightmares and her husband always away on business. I wanted to say something about how, as much as we revere those roles of wife and mother, it can be a lonely and exasperating life.

(2005, p23)

Such a dialogue-based genre requires complex characters with which audiences can engage. Dorothy Hobson spends a large part of her writing discussing both the importance of characters in soap opera, and the various types of characters that commonly appear within the narrative:

When thinking about the characters in soap opera it is always necessary to look at their total function and see how they are developing as a character. For the development of characters is one of the main features of the soap opera; and their ability to respond to different life events builds into the cumulative narrative of the soap.

(2003, p82)

Hobson moves into what she describes as the “assurance of recognition” (p105), where viewers are connected with the show’s characters in such a way that they expect them to act in certain ways. Characters need to be predictable, but still hold the ability to surprise.

Soap opera characters can be recognized as subject to various stereotypes. Although the basis for feminist criticism, stereotypes are necessary because they encapsulate personality traits - both favorable and unfavorable - and aid in prompting narrative information through certain characters. Dorothy Hobson furthers this idea,

The characters have to have the ability to be representations of real people and be recognizable for the individual characteristics and emotions, which link them with our subjectivities.

(2003, p84)

Not only are characters based around the common stereotypes that feminists had previously criticized, but also as we have seen, the genre itself is subject to a stereotypical attitude - that the majority of the soap opera audience is female. Over time, through research this assumption has been recognized as accurate, and exists predominantly as a result of the genre's reliance on strong female characters. The soap opera's major characters have always been women, and its themes are largely based around women's domestic issues. Although such themes may not seem to be appealing to the male viewer, trends have shown the male audience to be increasing. Included in this article is a statement expressed by Hobson from her 1982 book *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* that offers an assessment of character in soap opera at this time. She uses this as a point of comparison against which we can consider soap opera in a more contemporary context.

These serials have traditionally offered a range of strong female characters and this has proven a popular feature of the genre for its audience. They show women of different ages, class and personality types, and offer characters with whom many members of their female audience can empathize. They also include male characters often for romantic interest, sometimes as comic characters or 'bad' characters. But in the main the men do not have the leading roles within the serials.

(p85)

Christine Geraghty expands on these ideas in 1991 by asking whether or not the soap opera target audience has changed. She suggests that men are becoming more prominent both in terms of onscreen characters and the active audience member. We can test this idea against some more contemporary texts later in this thesis.

The setting up of a contemporary backdrop against which to compare *Desperate Housewives* is important here. *Desperate Housewives* is often considered to be a response to the conclusion of popular sitcom *Sex and the City*. Perhaps we could even offer the show the alternative, somewhat appropriate title, "*Sex in the Suburbs*"? Set in New York, *Sex and the City*, like *Desperate Housewives* focuses on four female protagonists and the dramas of their everyday lives. Airing from 1998 through to 2004, the show dealt with socially relevant issues, such as the changing roles of women. The term 'desperate' is of substantial importance here and will be unpacked in chapter three of this thesis. We can contextualize *Desperate Housewives* in terms of the way it is

positioned against other soap opera based series' of its time. Other series include, *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *24* (2001-present), *Prison Break* (2005-present), and *Men in Trees* (2006-present).

One of the most notable shifts in the soap opera genre and the way in which it has progressed over the past thirty years is to include a more liberal attitude towards sex and sexual relations. A genre embedded largely in emotional engagement, soap opera offers audiences content with which they can connect. Dorothy Hobson briefly outlines this growing trend. Written in 2003, this statement is relevant to more contemporary textual understanding:

Over the years soap opera has spanned there have been thousands of storylines that have involved sex and, in more recent years, the recognition of changing sexuality. Sexual attractions and the gratification of lustful desires have driven many of the storylines.

(p129)

We can compare a statement like this to Cantor and Pingree's work, twenty years earlier where sex appears of little importance.



Of course, explicit scenes of intercourse are not shown on television. Intercourse is implied by bedroom scenes and fades, morning-after scenes, or conversations.

(p77)

Soap opera is commonly subject to melodramatic influence. This conciliation of film and television genres is not uncommon and will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

Melodrama works in close conjunction with soap opera to flesh out its characters and provoke audience emotion. In her 1992 article, 'Speculations on the Relationship between Soap Opera and Melodrama', Christine Gledhill summarizes various scholarly positions concerning the relationship between these two interdependent genres. She acknowledges that Robert Allen makes no reference to melodrama in his work; by contrast, Tania Modleski "deploys the contrary term, 'soap opera melodrama', implicitly endorsing identification between the forms" (1989, p103). Ien Ang furthers this favorable melodramatic affiliation, stating, "*Dallas*, is particularly hospitable to the melodramatic imagination" (p103), and Gledhill herself pays homage to melodramatic influence, recognizing that soap opera appears to share its subject matter with melodrama, namely the home, family, and heterosexual relations. Soap opera, she believes, has essentially been moulded out of a melodramatic premise.

Soap opera has evolved from the intersection of a number of institutional, ideological, and aesthetic processes. For the broadcaster and advertisers, the motivation to produce soap

opera lay in the need to reach a female audience in the home. Economic and ideological conditions dictated the subject matter - home, family, relationships - while the social and aesthetic traditions of women's culture provided formal influence... The soap opera format and subject matter (were discovered to be) an ideal site for melodramatic enactments.

(p121)

## **v. Conclusions**

The current state of soap opera theory sees a variety of shifts within the genre; the post-2000 dominance of the prime-time soap opera, the amplification of sex and sexual content, a shift towards an increasing importance of male characters and themes within the genre, and the increase in generic hybridity that will become a focus of this thesis. *Desperate Housewives*, as a show encompassing all of these elements, can be used to recognize and solidify these generic shifts. The show's creator Marc Cherry suggests the show is "taking soap opera back to its roots...It's like the old days of women sitting around the kitchen table with a cup of coffee listening to the radio...but we've put a new tonality, a new twist to the genre, a little dark, a little funny, all mixed together" (McCabe & Akass, 2006, p12).

Female-centered themes and issues dominate the soap opera genre. It is this preoccupation with the feminine that makes noticeable even the slightest shift towards any kind of male-oriented narrative. Contemporary soap operas can be seen to highlight this transition through the inclusion of masculine ideas, roles and occupations. So how

can we explain this shift? Can it be understood as an attempt to parallel a changing society? Or is it simply an attempt to grasp a new audience? Feminists have shown a longstanding interest in soap opera, and it is important to understand why this interest has remained stable over time. As previously mentioned, Charlotte Brunsdon considers soap opera as a largely underrated and negatively stereotyped genre; its low budget and production values often overshadowing the feminine themes and strong female characters. Similarly, Christine Geraghty focuses on the changing role of women, both as soap opera character and active audience member. She considers soap opera to be a vehicle for promoting change and influencing attitudes.

Male characters and men's issues have become normalized in the soap operas of the 00's, an idea that will be discussed further in this thesis, an inclusion that I argue is to add depth to the desperation of the female characters. This catalytic inclusion, and the desperation that results will be discussed in chapter four, with specific reference to the male characters in *Desperate Housewives*.

## **I. Chapter Two**

### **Representations of Men in Film and Television: A Literature**

#### **Review**

Academic discussion of masculinity emerged in the early 1980s as a response to the saturation of a feminist understanding of film. Second wave feminism, lasting from the early 1960s through to the 1980s moved from the absolute rights surrounding Suffrage in feminism's first wave, to being concerned with issues of equality, oppression and discrimination; issues that were being reinforced through film. In his 2006 book *Cultures of Masculinity*, Tim Edwards provides a three-phase model of critical studies of masculinity that aids in effectively setting the scene for understanding the way male characters function in the context of film and television, as well as helping to better understand the social, cultural and academic contexts that become aligned through further literature. The first phase of masculinity studies, Edwards suggests took place in the 1970s, and was driven predominantly by the development of a sex role paradigm. The seventies are seen as revealing the socially constructed nature of masculinity, and looking at how these constructions were perceived by many as somewhat limiting to men, both physically and psychologically. A second phase of masculinity studies emerged in the 1980s, and was considered to be largely a criticism to the first phase that Edwards describes. Whereas the first wave of masculinity studies was seen to be creating equality between the sexes, the second wave served to reassert notions of power. Alongside gender and power relations, the concept of hegemony in masculinity was prominent. This hegemonic understanding included a dominant set of masculine positions exerting power

and control over the more oppressed masculinities: “Black working-class and gay men were seen to be subordinated to, and perhaps even exploited by, hegemonic white, Western, middle-class and heterosexual men and masculinities” (p3).

Edwards describes a third, more recent phase of masculinity as emerging in the 1990s. Influenced largely by post-structural theory, this phase poses a variety of questions surrounding gender normativity, performativity, and sexuality. Using these ‘landmarks’ of masculinity that Edwards describes, this literature review is divided into two interdependent categories, narrative representation and visual representation, and will chronologically approach the issue of masculinity in film and television. Joan Mellen provides a starting point for discussion and looking at films from the 1920 through to the 1970s, sets up what she considers to be the traditional masculine positions. With these historical positions in mind, Stella Bruzzi then builds on the positions held by men in film, focusing more specifically on issues of fatherhood.

With a narrative understanding established, the focus of this chapter then shifts to visual representations of men in film and television. Richard Dyer provides a useful framework for further discussion through his consideration of looking relations and the complications that arise when men are positioned as spectacle. Following on from Dyer, Steve Cohan builds on discussion of spectacle while also factoring in notions of difference, with Yvonne Tasker then looking at representations of the male body from a more contemporary perspective. Having moved towards more a contemporary discussion of men in film and television, the focus than shifts once again to look at the field that

currently surrounds *Desperate Housewives*. With narrative and visual representations of men in mind, Joke Hermes, Avi Santo, and Joanna Di Mattia work individually to provide an insight into masculinity in contemporary television series *24*, *The Sopranos*, and *Sex and the City*. This chapter aims to provide a critical framework against which to position a textual analysis of the men in *Desperate Housewives*.

### **i. Narrative Representation**

Written in 1978, a period embedded in Edward's first phase of masculinity, Joan Mellen's book *Big Bad Wolves- Masculinity in The American Film* can also be used as a starting point for a discussion of the role of the male character in American television. Mellen's book charts the male onscreen character from the 1920s through to the seventies. The text looks at each historical decade and focuses on the key films, characters and actors that exemplify varying states of masculinity in film as time progresses. The following statement reinforces the contextual framework in which Mellen is writing:

Repeatedly through the decades, Hollywood has demanded that we admire and imitate males who dominate others, leaders whom the weak are expected to follow. The ideal man of our films is a violent one. To be sexual he has had to be not only tall and strong but frequently brutal, promising to overwhelm a woman by physical force that was at once firm and tender. Male stars are people manufactured from the raw material of

humanity and appear as supermen overcoming women and lesser men by sheer determination and will, involving, in varying permutations, competence, experience, rationality - and charm.

(p3)

A dominant and somewhat traditional masculine position is largely evident here. The male character is described from the very beginning of the text as a bearer of absolute power.

Mellen divides her book into four key categories: men and violence, men and men, men and women, and men and work. We can use these categories as a starting point - as a benchmark against which to compare a more contemporary masculine narrative. Why is the heterosexual relationship referred to *after* the seemingly more important categories? Why is violence positioned in the forefront? Her chapter priorities alone speak volumes about the traditional state of masculinity in the 70s. By considering each of Mellen's categories in turn we can then map out a range of categories that are more relevant in the film and television narratives of the contemporary period. Mellen discusses the issue of 'men and violence' as a direct product of the Western genre, and the underlying idea that a man must settle the frontier by means of conquest - "As cowboy, cavalry man, gangster, private eye, or cop, the male hero has been created on the model of the frontiersman" (1978, p11). The 1970s are considered by Mellen to be a period of transition, whereby the male hero becomes more violent. She uses Clint Eastwood's character Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971) as a recurring example of this male hero. She associated Callahan

closely with the notion of 'silence' - "His solace had come, not from what were considered weak-minded confessions of uncertainty, regret, or fear, but from inner-strength, self-confidence, and pride in tasks well done" (1978, p13).

The issue of 'men and men' here, does not refer to the commonly connoted issue of homosexuality, but the male friendship. Mellen argues that the film hero is faced with a choice: if he chooses to engage in a relationship with a woman, then he disqualifies himself from actively enjoying friendships with males, an idea that again spurs from the 'cowboy and his sidekick' image of the Western genre. Discussion of sexuality is excluded in Mellen's work; instead heterosexuality is assumed and left unexplored.

The male bonding in American films in which two men travel together, epitomized by the cowboy with his sidekick resembles the pre-adolescent bonding of young males who temporarily fear women and prefer each other's company, yet indulge in excessive displays of machoism, to convince everyone that despite their exclusively male grouping they are really heterosexual.

(p15)

Statements such as the above reinforce the various taboos surrounding homosexuality that existed in the mainstream film and television of the 1970s. It is important to recognize that in this book, Mellen addresses men's relationships with men, before the issue of 'men and women' in relationships with a persuasive tone that appears to reassure the viewer that heterosexuality is inevitable.



Heterosexual relationships, in Mellen's eyes, are much more orthodox. Male characters in films, she claims, "have always sought and been gratified by relationships with women" (1978, p19). She says of the heterosexual couple as portrayed on film in the seventies:

The less violent a male has been required to be in our films, the greater has been his interest in heterosexual love. Unburdened by the need to sublimate his sexuality in sadistic acts of violence, the hero in films can express it naturally, and women were essential to his happiness.

(p19)

'Men and work' is the final category discussed by Mellen in her text - "heroes struggle for success, recognition, and supremacy" (1978, p20). She notes a transition through the decades, shifting, for example, from the 1920s male, described as a carefree hero with a carefree attitude who earns his living with ease, through to the male worker of the 1970s, described as "the unbending male who pursues his job unhampered by ambiguity, moral or otherwise...his quick on the trigger violence is applauded as effective" (1978, p25). Again, "Dirty Harry" Callahan is referred to as a quintessential example of this.

Mellen's book is essential to an understanding of masculinity in film and television because, unlike other texts of its kind, it literally starts at the beginning. It critiques the 1920s male as a starting point, making changes in the male character throughout film history much more apparent. We can track the fifty-year period of development from the

1920s through to the 1970s and hence create an effective starting point for a more contemporary analysis. Mellen summarizes her argument with the following statement,

It remains true that the more strident and hysterical the propaganda for this degenerate male ideal becomes, the more those .44 Magnums flash in the night as if they were the ultimate male organ, the more this definition of masculinity would be undermined, exposed as being unhinged.

(p345)

Stella Bruzzi in her 2005 book, *Bringing Up Daddy - Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* follows on from Joan Mellen's discussion of filmic portrayals of masculinity up until the 1970s, suggesting that the films of the 1980s displayed a masculinity heavily threatened by feminism. Bruzzi suggests that, like the resurgence of a "tougher masculinity" in the 50s, the 1980s produced a variety of films promoting notions of masculine independence and fatherhood, primarily through the action genre with films such as the *Indiana Jones Trilogy* (1981, 1984, 1989), *Terminator* (1984), and *Die Hard* (1988). Bruzzi suggests that, "macho fathers" (p132) often lack the instinct to nurture, however, the 1980s saw a change in representations of fatherhood both from a literal and a symbolic perspective. She cites brief examples of this; the *Terminator* plot is centered fundamentally around the need for restoration of the father-son relationship in order to save the future, *Indiana Jones* deals with a son's search for reconciliation with

his father, and *Die Hard* parallels John McLane's (Bruce Willis) success as an action hero over the course of the narrative with his success as both a husband and a father.

While 80s action narratives illustrate the revival of the strong father figure in film, Bruzzi provides a somewhat weaker masculine alternative through discussion of Michael Douglas' character Dan Gallagher in *Fatal Attraction*. Although Dan represents the traditional white, middle-class breadwinner, Bruzzi suggests that he is still an immensely flawed character, his weaknesses made explicit in the film's conclusion where it is his wife Beth (Anne Archer) who finally kills Alex (Glenn Close). While Dan deters from society's preferred nuclear family ideology through his adultery, when set against the delusional Alex he manages to represent a kind of normality. Bruzzi says of this idea, "In order to preserve the film's neo-conservatism, Dan must remain innocent in comparison to Alex, but this necessarily entails a certain emasculating passivity" (p131). Bruzzi articulates that although equilibrium is restored, Dan fails to represent a masculine archetype that would be desired by male viewers; instead leaving the strong male characters in the 80s action films as providing emulation for male fantasy.

The final father figure discussed by Bruzzi is the comic father of the late 80s in films such as *Look Who's Talking*, *Parenthood*, and *Three Men and a Baby*. These films bring to the forefront a "new man" (p146) who is actively involved in childcare, while also addressing alternatives to biological parenting. While theorists such as Tania Modleski in her book *Feminism Without Women* (1991) criticize *Three Men and a Baby* for its failure to represent women's rights as mothers, Bruzzi suggests that these kinds of films simply

use comedy to glorify male domesticity and highlight the bonds between father and child. She summarizes fatherhood as a prominent inclusion in the films of the 1980s due to the growing threat of feminism,

The 1980s was a time when the tensions surrounding the liberal revolutions of the previous decades surfaced: feminism had threatened the male sense of masculinity, of what it meant by 'being a man', but it also left unresolved the role of the father, the nurturing male. Fatherhood has, in the 1970s, been an important battleground: women successfully demanded that men did more of the childcare and more around the home...In the 1980s, traditional fatherhood reasserted itself.

(p115)

## ii. Visual Representation

Where Joan Mellen and Stella Bruzzi consider men in film from a narrative standpoint, Richard Dyer, Steve Cohan, and Yvonne Tasker focus on the visual representation of men. Richard Dyer brings looking relations to the forefront in his piece *Don't Look Now- The Instabilities of the Male Pin-up* from his 1992 publication, *Only Entertainment*. Dyer focuses on the disruption of traditional looking relations defined by writers such as John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1992) and the consequences that result when men are offered as

sexual spectacle. Although Dyer focuses specifically on the image of the male pinup, these ideas can be considered in terms of both still images and in film and television. Dyer discusses the way that the male body on display becomes feminized and connotes weakness, both deterring from notions of heterosexuality. He discusses ways to reinforce masculine power with regard to looking, suggesting that while a female on camera will typically avert her eyes, signifying an awareness or a modesty, the male will often look off-screen, denoting a lack of interest in the viewer, and subsequently, an interest in something that the viewer cannot see. Dyer summarizes issues of gender and power through reinforcing the active nature of looking and the passivity and powerlessness associated with being looked at.

Steve Cohan in his 1997 book *Masked Men*, sets up the 1950s homogenous male ideal—the white, heterosexual, ‘man in the grey flannel suit’, and identifies masculine representations that deviate from this model in terms of both appearance and behavior. He suggests that Hollywood in the 1950s was characterized largely by that which was included (class, age), that which was obscured (homosexuality), and that which was excluded outright (race). He says of masculine difference:

Each of the alternative personas is not an “image” or stereotype of masculinity, but a social position for masculinity; each interacts with others within the larger, hierarchical, ordered field of power relations, and each has its own discursive history which becomes imbricated in its cinematic representation.

(p.xvii)

With the 'man in the grey flannel suit' set up as a comparative model, Cohan then moves to discuss the rise of the male body in film, sighting Joshua Logan's *Picnic* (1955), and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as effective examples. The male body is an area that is excluded completely from Joan Mellen's preparatory text, but must be considered in the study given the shift since the 1970s and the fact that contemporary film and television displays the male body as a subject for the gaze of both the female and male observer on and off screen. Both *Picnic* and *The Ten Commandments* received wide critical discussion about the visual representation of male stars with the male spectacle gaining as much attention as the narrative itself. Cohan suggests that the success of the film *Picnic* relied heavily on the spectacle of William Holden's body. From the opening scene, Holden is presented bare-chested, with references to his body made throughout the narrative. Although the muscular body signifies a kind of phallic superiority, it also hinders the masculine position through symbolizing a preoccupation with physical labour, which in turn marks his social inferiority. This lack of status, Cohan suggests, deems the visual representation of the male body in film as purely sexual, encoding it with what Laura Mulvey has previously termed 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Cohan suggests that similar preoccupations with the male body as spectacle can be noted through critical reaction to *The Ten Commandments*.

Cohan articulates that although the film was produced with a religious premise in mind, vast attention was paid to the visual representation of both Charlton Heston's portrayal of Moses, and Yul Brynner's character Rameses. *The Ten Commandments* aids in bringing spectacular masculinity to the forefront with the body becoming a site of debate for

audiences and critics alike. Heston's transformation in the second half of the film makes Brynner's spectacular masculinity that much more explicit. Cohan reiterates this notion, suggesting "while the first part of *The Ten Commandments* puts Heston's massive body on display, the second part conceals it. Once Moses obeys the word of God, his hair turns white and, as a site of erotic spectacle, Heston's body becomes increasingly diminished in visual opposition to Rameses'/Brynner's" (p154).

Shifting once again from the hegemonic masculinity represented through the 'man in the grey flannel suit' that Steven Cohan describes, Richard Dyer moves to discuss visual representation in a different form, addressing difference and deviation through the representation of minority groups in film. In this collection *A Matter of Images* published in 1993, Dyer observes that the way social minority groups are treated in popular culture is a reflection of how they are treated in life. Dyer describes the term representation: as encompassing three fundamental elements - the idea that representations are essentially presentations that are shaped by the cultural context at any one time, the idea that cultural forms have multiple meanings whereby audiences can make sense of images in multiple ways, and finally, that what is represented is not reality, but other representations.

The focus of Dyer's work is in his discussion of cultural representations of homosexuals, a representation he problematizes in terms of discriminative terminology, stereotyping and representations of male sexuality in the media. He describes the various terminologies surrounding sexuality as damaging to one's identity- "having a word for oneself and one's group makes a politics out of what the word should be, draws attention

to and also reproduces one's marginality, confirms one's place outside of power and thus outside of the mechanisms of change" (1993, p9).

Linked closely to the idea of terminology is the concept of stereotypes, which Dyer describes as "the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights" (1993, p11). We can understand stereotyping firstly as a kind of ordering process, whereby society is made sense of through "generalities, patternings and typifications" (1993, p12). A stereotypical short cut arises from this ordering process in the form of an easily comprehensible, but negative typecast. Dyer uses the often stereotyped "dumb blonde" to highlight this. Stereotypes, Dyer suggests, require a consensus in order to function effectively, and thus he cites a two-fold character reference - he who is constructed through the use of immediately recognizable traits, and he whose traits are slowly revealed throughout the progression of the narrative. He says of this,

Such representations help to preserve the existing power relations of men over women by translating them into sexual relations, rendered both as biologically given and as a source of masculine pleasure.

(p121)

Dyer's text highlights the use of visual stereotypes that can be effectively applied to a discussion of *Desperate Housewives*. Dyer furthers his discussion of male sexuality with a look into symbolic representations of the penis in film, suggesting that outside of



pornography both male and female sexuality is symbolized rather than explicitly portrayed. He describes the penis as often operating as a separate entity from the male body and articulates that, “male sexuality is repeatedly equated with the penis; men’s sexual feelings are rendered as somehow being in their penises” (1993, p90). Film narratives centered around strong male characters often use weaponry to symbolize male sexual arousal; swords, knives, guns, and fists all commonly act as symbols of male pleasure as visually represented in the penis. While weaponry such as those mentioned connotes masculine power, Dyer suggests that the penis is a symbol of male potency and can be seen to legitimate that male power.

Symbolic representation of the penis is also commonly referenced within the realm of comedy with Mae West’s famous catch phrase, “Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?” providing a well-known starting point for this idea. Dyer discusses the humor in 1950s and 1960s comedy as playing on the anxiety felt by men surrounding the discrepancy between what the male genitals are actually like compared with what they are supposed to be like. He reinforces this notion through his suggestion that, “humor can touch on male fears about the inability to live up to what penises claim for them and can endorse female derision about the patriarchal overestimation of the penis” (p92). Symbolic representation of the penis, for Dyer, can be summarized as two-fold, positioning men as both powerful, through the use of phallic imagery, and weakened, through mockery and comparison.

Cohan and Dyer make clear for us that the visual representation of the male body in film is an area that has been widely debated. Yvonne Tasker uses images of the muscular body in the action genre to articulate masculine identity. She suggests that there is a strong link between star image, genre, and masculinity, and divides the debate into two independent positions - the 'tough guy', such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jean Claude van Damme, who use their spectacular bodies to assert power, and the 'wise guy', commonly played by Bruce Willis and Harrison Ford, who prefer to project their characters power through witty dialogue.

The 'tough guy,' or 'bodybuilder' as he is commonly referred to, faces a challenge, in that by offering 'to-be-looked-at-ness' he also projects a femininity associated with this passive position. Tasker suggests that the action genre provides a privileged space where the male body can be appropriately displayed, avoiding feminine connotations. She says of these common associations,

The figure of the muscleman hero dramatizes the instability of these categories and equations, combining qualities associated with masculinity and femininity, qualities which gender theory maintains in a polarized binary.

(p77)

The appearance-obsessed figure of the bodybuilder can also signal a narcissism that once again deters from definitions of manhood. Tasker suggests that this preoccupation with image, a trait also deemed feminine, requires films to repeatedly reaffirm the

heterosexuality of its stars. Like the two-fold position Dyer suggests is held by the symbolic penis, muscles function both to give the male action hero power and strength, but at the same time confirm him in a feminized position as defined through his body and his appearance. Where the 'tough guy' gains his power from his body, the 'wise guy' finds his strength in his comic articulation, primarily through the use of complex insults, challenges, and witty comebacks. Tasker describes this alternative means of power,

Words are very clearly deployed in film as part of a battle, a struggle for power, behind which lurks the threat of physical violence.

(p88)

This comprehensive binary set up by Tasker provides an effective mould against which we can look at men within the realm of television. While the construction of television deviates from its filmic counterpart with regard to production and presentation, the construction and representation of male characters bears vast similarities. This brief history of the narrative and visual presentations of men in film allows us to consider the various representations of men in contemporary television, which in turn paves the way for a more detailed understanding of the function of men in *Desperate Housewives*. Both aesthetically and in terms of the narrative, *Desperate Housewives* uses a range of elements from various film and television genres. It is this hybridity that extracts the text from the realm of daytime soap opera and positions it effectively within the prime time sphere. I will discuss in some detail a range of contemporary television genres, all of which contribute in some way to the *Desperate Housewives* generic makeup, looking

specifically at male characters and the way in which the function of men is constantly changing in terms of the roles they play, the spaces they occupy and their attitudes towards the opposite sex.

The increased hybridity of contemporary television genres has made way for increased critical discussion in the field. While traditionally television has been categorized in terms of its intended target audience - 'male genres' (action, crime, gangster) and 'female genres' (soap opera, melodrama, romantic comedy), an increase in genre hybridity has resulted in a blurring of this speculated gender divide. With a narrative so heavily invested in genre hybridity it is no surprise that the show offers such a wide array of male characters. As can be seen in the following reviews of literature on contemporary television, male characters and their actions differ depending on the generic framework they find themselves in at any one time. We can apply this idea to a variety of contemporary television texts as discussed in the literature below. Each of the following three articles have been taken from wider collections devoted entirely to a specific television show and have been selected based on their engagement with issues involving male characters.

Jack is often seen to prioritize his work and he believes that his country needs him.

Although work is a priority, Jack embodies a Western--like attitude towards family.

When his family comes under scrutiny or attack, Jack, like the lone cowboy, seeks justice and revenge. Hermes suggests that traditionally in the Western narrative, the hero's wife and children do not survive, a generic convention made explicit through the death of Jack's wife at the end of the show's first season.

The western genre is traditionally split into two key localities - civilization and wilderness, terms that we can also apply to Jack Bauer's character. We can understand these concepts in terms of both the vast geographical and physical distances covered by Jack throughout this real-time narrative, as well as through his changing behavioral states, put simply, his ability to frequently transform from a civilized professional to a wild criminal, and vice versa. The third generic distinction Hermes identifies is that of the soap opera, aligning Jack with the role of the caring father. As has been discussed previously in Joan Mellen's work, parenthood extends the range of responsibilities faced by the primary male characters in an action narrative. Jack, Hermes implies, "has the never-ending responsibility of rearing, chasing, and protecting his ill-fated (and profoundly irritating) daughter, Kim" (p169). While traditional fatherhood is present, these soap-operatic notions are still heavily influenced by the surrounding action. Rather than offering traditional fatherly advice, Jack teaches his daughter to learn about important social issues such as violence, crime, and sexism through the experiences she may face as a result of her connections to him. Hermes summarizes Jack's style of fatherhood through the following episode description,

In 2:13 [Season 2, Episode 13], Kim faces the murderous father of a little girl she has been babysitting. The man is a psychopath: he abused and killed his wife, and was stopped by Kim from doing the same to his daughter. Instructed by Bauer over the phone (of course), she manages to shoot him and kill him. In this moment, 24 brings together father and daughter in an explosive manner. It shows Kim following in her father's footsteps, doing what a man (and at times a girl) needs to do.

(p170)

With family-centered television narratives in mind, Avi Santo turns our attention to another famous father figure, Tony Soprano, in his 2002 essay "*Fat Fuck! Why Don't You Take A Look In The Mirror?*" *Weight, Body Image and Masculinity in Sopranos* from David Lavery's collection *This Thing Of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*.

Throughout the essay Santo discusses the representation of men in the mafia genres such as *The Sopranos*, focusing primarily on the genre's regular use of overweight male characters. Whereas Steve Cohan and Richard Dyer have discussed the spectacular nature of the muscular male body, Santo uses the show's protagonist Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), to suggest alternatively, that although the male body is often portrayed as "soft and unfit" (2002: p72), this is by no means a signifier of failure. Overweight men, particularly in the gangster genre, Santo suggests, have in the past been associated with evil and villainous roles in film and television. With this tradition in mind he then moves to discuss different ways of understanding the physical representation of Tony Soprano.

Firstly, Santo argues that Tony's body and weight act as a signifier of the corruption of the American Dream, suggesting that "his body size sets off a series of cultural associations with greed and moral bankruptcy that lend validity to the show's narrative depiction of Tony's illegal activities and provide a subtext that links Tony's success and wealth in an otherwise decaying set of values" (2002, p76). Greed, in this context, connotes both notions of over-eating, and of financial selfishness. Both understandings of this term lend to a deeper understanding of Tony's character, and of the general representation of men within the mafia genre.

Greed and self-indulgence are also factors relevant to Santo's second understanding of male character representation, whereby weight labels Tony as an overgrown child. Here, we can parallel the self-indulgence and lack of concern of limitations with regard to food and eating with Tony's actions as a mafia leader. Santo moves on to discuss other metaphorical parallels between the two such as his unforgivable tantrums, and the fact that, like a child, Tony is well intentioned even though his behavior towards others is horrific. Like Tony's character in *The Sopranos*, "children are often podgy and show no concern for limitations. They are often depicted as innocent, despite their repeated behavior...children are not subject to the same bodily self-discipline that adults enforce on themselves" (2002, p76). The lack of limitation described here leads to Santo's third notion, that Tony's lack of control in matters concerning his weight parallel his lack of control in violence. Tony's fatness signifies both his power and an inability to have control of his body. When Tony is represented as aware of his physical flaws (particularly

on visits with his therapist), he is forced to confront other psychological issues. It is through these sessions that viewers get to witness rare periods of Tony's vulnerability.

The fourth issue that Santo discusses builds on Susan Bordo's discussion of the body as a signifier of social mobility, or in other words, the body as indicative of one's social identity. Bordo's ideas can be aptly applied to both a reading of Tony Soprano and of the three points previously discussed by Santo. Santo quotes Bordo in his text reinforcing her contention that, traditionally, "emerging middle-class embraced the svelte aristocratic body ideal over its vulgar bourgeois counterpart, partly as a status seeking measure and partly as a response to the shifting definition of power which came to be identified less with display than with control, and more importantly, self control" (Bordo 1999, quoted in Santo, 2002, p78). Santo builds on this notion when describing Tony, suggesting that his struggle to conform to both middle-class aesthetics and values is repeatedly reinforced through his inability to conform physically.

Santo goes on to suggest that Tony's outward appearance often contradicts his surroundings and the social world that he finds himself in, stating bluntly "Tony is a slob, and his appearance is at odds with the visual grandeur of his surroundings" (2002, p79). Although the character of Tony Soprano is visually represented as unfavorable in his appearance, Santo makes clear for us that his sloppy demeanor does not reflect his success in mafia business. *The Sopranos* provides an alternative to the more traditional representation of men in television series' such as *Dallas*. The male protagonist of the



contemporary television series is complex due to the way they combine and challenge traditional and more familiar television characteristics.

Often credited as the primary inspiration for *Desperate Housewives*, the narrative of HBO's *Sex and the City* is centered on four single woman and their quests for romance in New York City. Much like Wisteria's housewives, the women in *Sex and the City* are constantly critiquing themselves as a response to various kinds of male attention. In Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's 2006 essay *Reading Sex and the City*, Joanna Di Mattia comments on these female preoccupations further in her text, *What's the Harm in Believing? Mr. Big, Mr. Perfect, and the Romantic Quest for Sex and the City's Mr. Right*. Di Mattia reinforces the notion that although the show promotes itself as a narrative about sex and the single girl, there is an underlying quest by the protagonist females for the "classic romance fantasy" (2006, p17). Using the show's narrator Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica-Parker) as a case study here, Di Mattia describes three main "types" of men. Throughout the six-season life span of *Sex and the City* (without considering the soon-to-be-released movie version) audiences have followed Carrie's quest for love and romance. Aside from a series of short-term relationships and meaningless flings, Carrie's desire shifts between two male characters - "Mr. Big" (Chris Noth) and Aiden Shaw (John Corbett). Mr. Big, the "classically phallic 'seducer'" (p19) represents what Di Mattia describes as 'spectacular masculinity', suggesting, "almost everything about him is hard, angular, and dark" (2006, p18).

Carrie is presented as possessing the ability to have any man she desires, however, it is Mr. Big who for the first time exists just outside of her grasp. Although emotionally inaccessible, he provides her with much needed passion and excitement, and becomes somewhat of an irresistible fantasy. Big's inability to commit evokes uncertainty in Carrie, both uncertainty about herself and uncertainty about finding love in New York City. She says to her close friend Miranda Hobbs (Cynthia Nixon), "I'm in love with him and I'm terrified he's going to leave me because I'm not perfect" (2006, p22).

Carrie comes into season three of *Sex and the City* with a mind open to new possibilities for love and it is at this point that she meets Aiden Shaw who Di Mattia describes as "another archetype that contrasts with Big...He was warm, masculine, and classic American" (2006, p24). Aiden represents for Di Mattia a 'sensitive masculinity' - he is dependable, loyal, and most importantly, emotionally accessible.

Aiden is the archetypal, post-feminist fantasy of masculinity: a reconfigured fantasy mixing the traditional phallic hero with the sensitive new man. Aiden is no less an attractive model of Mr. Right than Big; rather, he is another model for Carrie to project her fantasies upon.

(p24)

While Aiden satisfies Carrie in many ways, thoughts of Mr. Big are constantly looming in the background. Carrie is unable to escape the intensity and passion she feels with Big, although the stability offered by Aiden is something she has always craved. She tells Miranda, "Aiden is acting exactly the way I wish Big would have behaved, and I am

behaving just like Big” (2006, p25). Big and Aiden both offer Carrie very appealing romance narratives, and she is constantly in debate over who is better suited to her at any one time. It is at this point that audiences are presented with a new potential suitor in the form of Jack Berger (Ron Livingston). Berger arrives at a time in Carrie’s life when she thinks all is lost. She has lost her faith in love and relationships and is mending old wounds. Di Mattia says of Berger’s well-timed introduction, “Like a knight in black leather, he enters the scene at the burger bar ready to sweep Carrie off her feet with his impressive and commanding masculinity” (2006, p31). Berger is charming and funny and it is not long before Carrie recognizes that the two hit it off. However, after dating for a while she soon learns that underneath the charming exterior lies a “mass of anxiety and nerves” (2006, p31), to which she is not attracted.

In the final season of *Sex and the City*, Russian artist Alekandr Petrovsky, (who, due to the date of publication, is not discussed in McCabe and Akass’s collection), pursues Carrie. Alekandr looks to be the man to finally distract Carrie from Big’s inconsistencies; and although he lacks Big’s sex appeal and Aiden’s open affection, he provides her with financial stability and offers her the chance to escape both New York City and her failed relationships. It is not until Carrie physically relocates to Paris that she realizes the isolation that comes with a relationship with Alekandr. She is alone in a foreign city with a foreign language making life with Big, despite his flaws, that much more appealing. In the show’s finale Carrie reunites with Big, who has matured in his actions and his intentions. His transformation from a promiscuous hothead into a sincere gentleman is reinforced for us through the revealing of his real name, John, a detail that is hidden over

the show's six seasons. At the show's conclusion Carrie appears satisfied; she is back in New York City, she has returned to her three close friends, and most importantly, she has established the desired heterosexual romance.

Di Mattia suggests that by looking at the four key relationships in the onscreen lifespan of *Sex and the City's* key character Carrie Bradshaw we can understand the way in which male characters contribute to the fantasies and realities of the female protagonists as actively present in a narrative that, like *Desperate Housewives*, borrows heavily from prime time soap opera. With literature dedicated to contemporary television becoming increasingly prominent I will look at the way that other male characters have been discussed in the past. Steven Peacock and Avi Santo look specifically at male protagonists and the way they function within hybrid genres. In *Jack Bauer* we witness a man who is so focused on his job and being a "hero" that he frequently neglects his family obligations. In *Tony Soprano* we see a somewhat ironic two-fold devotion to both his mob work and his family. Joanna Di Mattia then moves to discuss the male characters 'Mr. Big', Aiden Shaw, Jack Berger, and Alekandr Patrovsky in *Sex and the City*. Although moving away from genre hybridity, *Sex and the City* can be aligned closely with *Desperate Housewives* both in terms of its subject matter and its characters. By combining these three literary arguments we can set the scene for the discussion to come on the male characters in *Desperate Housewives* and the positions they occupy, but first we must define the parameters of a narrative of desperation against which we can consider these men.

## I. Chapter Three

### Defining Desperation

The figure of the housewife has commonly been associated with the space of the home, and the desperation that has come to signify domesticity has arguably become an integral component of her construction.

Bautista 2006, p156

Having prepared the way for situating *Desperate Housewives* in the context of women's television genres, I will trace its origins across the woman's film, using *Now, Voyager* (1942) as a starting point, moving then to *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) and the "films for women" of the 1970s, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) the female auteur work of the 80s, and finally look at the post-feminist "chick flick" and *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), keeping in mind both the themes of desperation and the role of men as inherent in the narrative of *Desperate Housewives*.

In her 1987 book *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Mary Ann Doane brings the term 'woman's film' to the forefront suggesting, simply, that it is centered around a female protagonist with the "anticipated presence of the female spectator" (p4). Jeanine Basinger in her book *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to*

*Women* uses the term again in 1993 and provides a range of ideas surrounding what constitutes such a genre.

The primary thing about the woman herself in the woman's film is that she be strong, interesting, beautiful, or glamorous enough to be able to command centre stage. These are the films that glorify women, that say that women's problems matter. They exist to give substance to women's feelings.

(p25)

The woman's film is centered on the problems faced by women in everyday life, with the narrative commonly structured around their flaws and anxieties. Basinger reinforces these ideas, suggesting that; "the woman in the woman's film does what she can according to the limits of who she is supposed to be inside the genre that has been generously bestowed on her as her own" (1993, p42). The woman's film borrows its generic characteristics largely from melodrama - the central female protagonist, a range of obstacles that challenge that protagonist, and the audience to which the text is targeted. Kathleen Rowe says of the melodrama, "melodrama explores the victimization of the desiring woman, who triumphs mainly in her suffering" (p96).

As we will see, terms like 'desire', 'suffering', and 'victimization' are key themes in the narrative of desperation. Here, desperation is about the suffering of both character, and by implication, viewer. This suffering stems largely from the women within the narrative holding romantic ideals, and it is here where discussions of men become important.

With the function of the male characters as the emphasis here, we can chart the history of desperation in the woman's film through chronological analyses of four case studies- *Now, Voyager*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Although stemming largely from textual analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, an effective binary can be noted with regard to themes of desire throughout the narratives of these four films. I term this binary 'Desperate Realities vs. Desperate Fantasies', and will apply to each film in an attempt to provide a consistent framework against which *Desperate Housewives* can be compared. The women in these films fantasize desperately, about an alternative to their reality. 'Desperate reality' refers in this sense to the rudimentary goings on of everyday life - relationship woes, struggling marriages, motherhood, and fading sex lives, whilst the 'desperate fantasy' refers to that which the women desire- to experience romance, a luscious new neighbor, the re-kindling of an old flame, an illicit affair, or a return to the workforce. It is through these consistencies that we can recognize 'desperation' as a long-standing and familiar state for female characters in film and television.

### **i. Now, Voyager**

Some girls aren't the marrying kind.

Charlotte Vale, *Now, Voyager*

*Now, Voyager* acts as a classic starting point here, with Jeanine Basinger describing the film, most adequately, as "the definitive woman's film of all time" (1993, p438). Maria

Laplace in her article *Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film: Discursive Struggle in Now, Voyager*, says of the woman's film,

The woman's film is distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view and its narrative which most often revolves around the traditional realism of woman's experience: the familial, the domestic, the romantic- those arenas where love, emotion and relationships take precedence.

(1987, p139)

Set in 1942, a period in which women were considered largely passive in their actions and decision-making, the film is centered around the transformation of Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) and her desperation as she tries to escape the domination of her mother and follow on her quest for the fulfillment of her desires. Here, desperation can be seen to equate with a woman's struggle to overcome life's obstacles. Jeanine Basinger reinforces this notion suggesting that, "in every way, [*Now, Voyager*] represents the woman's world, the woman's life, and the woman's problems with herself and with men, marriage, and motherhood" (1993, p439).

Charlotte's agency as a woman shifts along with the narrative progression. With her transformation (both physically and emotionally) being the fundamental turning point, we can understand her shifting agency in terms of both 'pre-transformation' and 'post-transformation'. In *Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and Now, Voyager*, Stanley Cavell reinforces this notion, suggesting that, "the film is preoccupied with



change” (1996, p23). It is against this change, or transformation, that we can map the key themes of both ‘desperation’ and the woman’s genre itself.

Pre-transformation Charlotte is emotionally bound to the confines of her own home and is subject to emotional restriction at the hands of her mother. She has little control over her own actions and lacks the confidence and freedom to make her own decisions. Upon changing herself physically, Charlotte receives the positive affirmations necessary to make the emotional changes needed to challenge her mother’s repressive attitude.

Although Charlotte has transformed physically, however, she still has a desperate need to be wanted, needed and loved. She embarks on a journey (both physically and metaphorically) and begins to enjoy the freedom she has lacked for so long. It is both during and as a result of this voyage that surrounding themes come into play.

Although desire exists pre-transformation as Charlotte longs to escape the confines of her mother, desire is present, most obviously, in the form of heterosexual romance and the undeniable chemistry that exists between the ‘new’ Charlotte and the handsome Jerry Durrance (Paul Henreid). Jerry acts as a kind of ‘proof’ that Charlotte’s transformation has been a success. The narrative is somewhat disrupted on learning that Jerry is in fact married with a family, and we are sympathetic for Charlotte as the desire for marriage is stripped away. On learning he has a daughter who is challenged socially, much like her former self, Charlotte is able to connect with Jerry on a different, and arguably deeper level than before. It is here that themes of motherhood, and, although unorthodox, female friendship come into play. Karen Hollinger in her book *Female Friendship- Melodrama*,

*Romance and Feminism*, describes female friendship as “a process of transformation in which women become strong and gain independence through each other” (p146). This reciprocal relationship described by Hollinger can be effectively paralleled to the relationship between Charlotte and Tina (Janice Wilson). Charlotte can sympathize with Tina, whilst at the same time Tina gains a supportive and understanding mother figure in Charlotte. Although Charlotte does not achieve complete fulfillment of the desired role of marriage to the man she loves, she maintains her own independence whilst still finding some semblance of both female companionship and a nuclear family. In choosing to begin mapping desperation here we are in turn embedding desperation into the premise of melodrama and the woman’s film. The concept, and its corresponding genres are not only lumped together in terms of their establishment, but maintain a steady relationship throughout film history, as we will observe through the following examples.

While the relationship between Charlotte Vale and her mother is essential to a discussion of Charlotte’s journey as a character, the focus here is the relationships between Charlotte and the film’s three primary male character’s - Charlotte’s psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), her first lover, Jerry Durrance, and her second lover, Elliot Livingston (John Loder). The first of the men we meet is Dr. Jaquith, who is called into the Vale household in an attempt to ‘fix’ Charlotte. The scene opens on the stairwell in the Vale house. As her mother (in voiceover form) describes Charlotte’s upbringing and status as an ‘ugly duckling’ we witness a close-up of thick stocking-clad legs coming down the stairs. On hearing her mother’s critical remarks Charlotte returns hurriedly to her room and we witness our first shot of her in full view. She is represented as severely hindered

both in terms of her appearance (thick eyebrows, glasses, frown etc), and her mannerisms and confidence (closed body, fidgets with her hands, speaks very little). Almost immediately we can sense a strong relationship forming between Charlotte and Dr. Jaquith through his complimenting of her carved wooden boxes, a hobby which Charlotte has until now strictly kept private. His unexpected compassion towards Charlotte sees his status as an authoritative medical figure transform rapidly to a confidante, an advisor and most importantly, a friend. Rather than scorn her secretive smoking habit, he attempts to join her, with the act of smoking becoming a metaphor for the level of equality Dr. Jaquith desires. He makes his intentions clear early in the film: "It's very simple really, what I try to do. People walk along a road, they come to a fork in the road; they are confused. They don't know which road to take. I just put up a signpost - not that way, this way".

Dr. Jaquith becomes a mediating figure who Charlotte can turn to when she faces uncertainty. She consistently updates him on the goings-on in her life and confides in him with her utmost secrets, commenting in one letter, "I don't know why I tell you this except I tell you almost everything". Charlotte utilizes the advice of Dr. Jaquith to make things happen, and it is his suggestion she pose on the ship cruise that allows her to meet the object of her fantasy - Jerry Durrance. Although Jerry never makes a secret of his status as a married man, it is obvious to Charlotte that he is unhappy (a fact that is reinforced to her by a mutual friend later in the film). Charlotte and Jerry share a mutual comfort in each others company, and it is not long before she reveals both her real identity and evidence of her former appearance. Jerry questions her photograph, "Who is

the fat lady with the heavy brows and all the hair?” but on learning the truth, his opinion of her and attitude towards her does not alter. A car accident in Rio forces the two to spend a night together, and Jerry’s true feelings towards Charlotte are announced.

Although their status as a couple is apparent through their actions in each other’s company, the fact that Jerry is married with children is constantly lingering in the background. On the ship’s arrival home the couple part ways and both return to their respective lives. Although Charlotte is a changed woman in the eyes of her family, her desperation for heterosexual love is still very much apparent. It is at this point that Charlotte’s ‘desperate fantasy’ becomes evident - a fantasy in which Jerry is not married and the pair can begin a life together.

It is on returning home, however, that Charlotte’s ‘desperate reality’ begins to take shape, as she is strongly encouraged to begin a relationship with Elliot Livingston. In the eyes of her family, Elliot embodies everything that Charlotte should want in life; he is rich, he comes from a good family and, most importantly, he wants to marry her. Charlotte’s desperate situation has reached its pinnacle when she sees Jerry at a party. She describes her relationship with Elliot, indicating to Jerry that she is far from content, “[He is] a lot like you in many ways. Oh not your sense of humor, nor your sense of beauty, nor your sense of play. But a fine man, and a kind of refuge I thought I could never have”. Such a statement reinforces both for Jerry and for the audience that Charlotte views Elliot as a safe alternative to her longing for the chemistry once experienced upon the voyage. She has accepted the reality of marriage, of potential motherhood, and of keeping her family,

in particular her mother, happy. Throughout the progression of their relationship Elliot appears to be oblivious to Charlotte's unhappiness, however, it is he who makes the initial suggestion that perhaps their union wouldn't be a favorable one.

*Now, Voyager* differs from other woman's films in that the heterosexual romance fails to be restored. Charlotte concludes that happiness can be found in avenues outside of romance, and takes great satisfaction in helping instill confidence in Jerry's daughter, Tina. She accepts that Jerry cannot leave his wife, and so becomes content in connecting with him in a different way. The reality of an unhappy marriage to Elliot is overcome, and the arrival of happiness and fantasy, although unconventional, appears immensely satisfying, reinforced through a conclusive shot of Charlotte and Tina standing on the Vale stairwell once again; a picture of confidence, elegance, and sophistication.

## ii. **An Unmarried Woman**

Take me to your loft Charlie.

Erica, *An Unmarried Woman*

In 1978, Paul Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman* was released during a period of second-wave feminism. During this time issues of gender equality became prominent, and films like *An Unmarried Woman* aimed to put an end to discrimination and oppression faced by women and shift their issues to the forefront. One reviewer reinforces this idea,

One of a group of new “women’s pictures” made in the wake of post - 1960s feminism including *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) and *The Turning Point* (1977), *An Unmarried Woman* updated the genre’s concern with relationships and love by turning the heroine’s unwedded status into a positive growth experience...*An Unmarried Woman* astutely pointed to how far the new 1970s woman had come -- and how far she still needed to go.

(Bozzola, 2007)

Like *Now, Voyager*, *An Unmarried Woman* is centered on a transformation of sorts; the seemingly unfavorable shift from a marriage described by friends as “perfect” to the lonely and confusing existence of being “unmarried”. Even the title of the film itself connotes negative feelings. ‘Desperation’ in *An Unmarried Woman* lies primarily in the way in which protagonist Erica (Jill Clayburgh) attempts to rebuild her life after her husband leaves her and her marriage disintegrates. Between the security of her marriage to Martin (Michael Murphy) and the newfound balance of her relationship with Saul (Alan Bates), Erica experiences a variety of feelings that I wish to associate with the notion of desperation - anger, confusion, longing, suffering and desire.

Erica’s agency is initially hindered by her husband’s sudden departure. She appears confused and lost and Martin appears to have full control of her emotional well-being. It is not until she begins to make changes in her life, such as seeking help from a

psychiatrist, discussing her problems with her friends, and engaging in sexual relations for the first time outside of her marriage, that Erica regains control of her emotions and regains the ability to make decisions regarding her own happiness. In the opening scenes of the film it appears that Erica's reality and fantasy are very closely aligned. She quite literally has it all; an adoring husband, an intelligent daughter, an exciting sex life, a great job, and an even better group of friends. On Martin's departure, however, these positions appear to shift quite significantly. Erica's 'desperate reality' becomes that of, as the title suggests, an unmarried woman, who is overcome with self-doubt and confusion. What is interesting to note here is that we never really witness Erica pining for the loss of Martin. Her 'desperate fantasy' is never to actually get back the 'perfect' marriage she once boasted; instead she becomes preoccupied by the desire to move on with her life. The focus in this film is the "unmarried" state and turning Erica's unwedded status into a positive growth experience.

In the essay *Three Women's Films*, from the collection *Films for Women* edited by Charlotte Brunsdon, Christine Geraghty describes the women's genre of the seventies as "films [made] with women as the audience consciously in mind" (1991, p138). These 'films for women' differ from the historical genre of the 'woman's film' that Basinger describes. Situated in a period between the 1930s and 1950s, Basinger describes the 'woman's film' as "successful because it worked out a paradox. It both held the women into social bondage and released them into a dream of potency and freedom. It drew women in with images of what was lacking in their lives and sent them home reassured that their own lives were the right thing after all" (p6). Basinger also states that the

woman's film prides its generic form on the inclusion of a "desperate character" (p8), and so comparisons can be made between films such as *Now, Voyager*, and its more contemporary counterparts.

The 1970s saw a shift, both in the type of women being portrayed in film as well as the type of women at which the stories were aimed. Annette Kuhn discusses this notion further in Brunsdon's collection, *Films for Women*,

In these films [since the middle 1970s], the central characters are women, and often women who are not attractive or glamorous in the conventional sense. Narratives, moreover, are frequently organized around the process of a woman's self-discovery and growing independence. The existence of this 'new women's cinema' might be explained in terms of direct determination: that is simply reflects the growth and influence of the women's movement.

(p125)

Geraghty spends a significant portion of her discussion emphasizing the role of the camera in the film, *An Unmarried Woman*, suggesting that the way characters are framed in specific shots is indicative of both their relationship with themselves and others. She discusses the framing of Erica, suggesting that close-ups of her face aid in heightening emotion for the viewer. The audience is asked to sympathize with her situation. Likewise



the way in which she is framed with her respective lovers can be seen to parallel the state of the couple's relationship at the time.

In the scenes with Martin and Charlie, Erica, although obviously with them, is seen often isolated in close-up; in her conversations with Martin, the editing gives us their faces separately. When she is with Saul, however, even when they are not embracing but are talking at the party or sitting on a street bench, we are given both their faces in close-up in the same frame, and the idea of the strength of their relationship is conveyed in such framing as much as in words.

(1986, pp140-141)

The role of men in this film is interesting in that each male character is symbolic of both a different phase in the film's narrative and at the same time is indicative of a new phase in Erica's life. Martin, the cheating husband, provides the basis for Erica's initial desperation, Charlie (Cliff Gorman), the work colleague, provides an outlet for Erica's sexual needs, and through this gratification enables her to move on with her life, and finally, Saul, who provides remedy for her broken heart. Although the film resolves with us unaware of the future of their relationship, we are satisfied with the fact that she appears happy and that her faith in the heterosexual romance is restored. The male characters in *An Unmarried Woman* act as screens onto which Erica can project her desperation.

Although the film is centered largely around four characters - Erica, Martin, Saul and Erica's daughter Patti (Lisa Lucas), there are a range of secondary characters who are of huge importance both to Erica's growth as a character and to the narrative itself. The first of these is the psychiatrist through whom "Erica is told of the importance of feeling her sense of confusion and lack of control is explained and placed as being understanding and normal" (Geraghty, 1986, p142). Discussion of her feelings appears to be Erica's greatest coping mechanism and her psychiatrist attempts to 'mediate' her desperation, offering suggestions and strategies through which to manage it. Geraghty suggests that discussion of feelings is not restricted solely to sessions with her therapist, and that Erica's female friends comprise a stable and trusted group onto which Erica can both offload and compare her desperate experiences- "Erica's conversations with her girlfriends are reflective about life, men, relationships and self esteem" (1986, p142).

One reviewer describes these female friendships,

Erica has a trio of female friends with whom she regularly commiserates. Each of the women represents a different viewpoint along the feminist continuum. One longs, desperately for old-fashioned romance, one views her own open marriage with a jaded resignation, and one revels in her predatory sexual prowess. Erica modulates between these extremes, experimenting with each but ultimately offering a more moderate feminist reality.

(Mancire, 2007)

While *Now, Voyager* begins with the protagonist female in a state of utter despair, *An Unmarried Woman* opens with Erica living in what appears to be (both in her mind and in the opinion of her friends) the perfect marriage. The film opens with Erica and her husband, Martin out jogging. Although equality between the pair is immediately established both through their jogging attire and the pace and style in which they run, tension becomes evident through Martin's overreaction to treading in dog poo. Instead of tending to her husband's misfortunes, Erica runs ahead of him, a symbolic act of things to come. Martin catches up with Erica, apologizes for his over reaction, and suggests a "quickie", using sex as a kind of bargaining tool. The pair laugh and continue their run - the picture of a healthy marriage. When Martin admits he has been having an affair Erica's life appears to crumble before her and she descends into her 'desperate reality' - a depressed and humiliated single mother. She has been reduced to the unfavorable level of her friends- the women who once placed her on a pedestal.

With the bulk of the narrative centered on Erica's search for happiness after learning of her husband's infidelity, it is not surprising that men play a prominent role in *An Unmarried Woman*. The cheeky and confident work colleague Charlie, and the desperate and pushy 'blind date' Bob (Andrew Duncan), both mark important turning points in Erica's life. With Charlie, Erica is able to discover sex with someone other than Martin for the first time. She is aggressive in her actions and makes her intentions towards him immediately clear; however, on entering his bedroom she becomes vulnerable and requests the lights be turned off. Charlie manages to help Erica relax through tickling her

and laughing with her. Although the two will never become a couple as such, Erica's brief encounter with Charlie helps her overcome the initial awkwardness of being with another man. He has essentially served his purpose as a secondary character and is not again referred to till later in the film.

From the early stages of their blind date it is obvious that Erica is uncomfortable in Bob's presence. The scene is presented as extremely uncomfortable through the use of negative body language and forced conversation. The awkward nature of the liaison is intensified as Bob forces himself on Erica during their taxi ride, where, although presented as a passive character through the narrative thus far, she retaliates in an uncharacteristic way, screaming at him and demanding to be let out of the car. Although the experience itself is presented as unfavorable, a deeper reading of her retaliation suggests a kind of turning point for Erica. Her ability to project her anger onto another acts as a means of dispensing all the negative feelings stored up from Martin's infidelity, and from this moment in the narrative Erica is able to make more educated decisions about her life. The two men act as stepping-stones, aiding Erica in moving closer towards her 'desperate fantasy'.

'Desperate fantasy' in Erica's case appears to be not so much centered around men, whether that be rekindling romance with Martin, or embarking on a relationship with a new man, but more coming to terms with her own happiness. As the narrative progresses, so too does Erica's confidence to move on with her life, a progression that is interrupted suddenly in the latter stages of the film when Martin announces he wants to try and restore the marriage. Having come to terms with her own independence, Erica is able to

deny Martin's proposition and situate her desires elsewhere. She has transformed from a suffering single into an independent and confident woman.

At the point in the narrative at which we meet Saul it appears that Erica's inhibitions are long forgotten. Erica and Saul meet at the gallery and although little conversation is exchanged, the scene then cuts to a shot of the pair getting re-dressed after sex. In the presence of Saul Erica is a whole new woman, and says of the relationship, "I feel great. I feel happy". The relationship progresses typically, with Saul meeting Erica's friends at the gallery, and meeting Patti, her daughter over dinner, however, when Erica denies Saul's proposal to spend the summer in Vermont with him tension begins to mount. It is at this point that we witness an alternative to Saul's more charming side as he falls into a tantrum-like state when Erica turns him down. With the future of the couple uncertain it seems that Erica may not achieve the happiness she hoped for, however the films concluding scene of Saul departing to Vermont and Erica agreeing to visit regularly, suggest that in fact Erica's desperate fantasy has been restored- she has both the love and commitment of Saul, whilst at the same time maintaining her own independence due to the physical distance between the two. Whereas the opening scenes of Erica represent her as existing amidst the monotony of a 'happy' marriage, the closing scenes show her making her way down a New York street carrying a ridiculously over-sized painting from Saul, suggesting a newfound ability to overcome obstacles in issues of life and of love.

### iii. **Desperately Seeking Susan**

Roberta couldn't be a prostitute! She doesn't even like sex that much. It's impossible.

Gary Glass, *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

Where Erica in *An Unmarried Woman* longs for the return to a life of normality and perfection, protagonist Roberta in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, in contrast, craves a life outside of the seemingly perfect existence provided for her from her successful husband Gary. Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) recognizes that her marriage is turning stale and attempts to find excitement elsewhere. It is here that the 'desperate reality' vs. 'desperate fantasy' binary can be aptly applied. Roberta's desperate reality refers to her marriage, which, not unlike Erica's marriage to Martin in *An Unmarried Woman*, appears perfect. Desperate fantasy, in this case, stems from the fact that Roberta is bored. Her life lacks scandal and excitement, which leads her to become obsessed with the life of another - Susan (Madonna), who she knows of only through personal advertisements in her local paper. After fantasizing about Susan and slowly acquiring different aspects of her identity, Roberta is accidentally knocked out and is mistaken for Susan both by herself and others, leading to a variety of misunderstandings and complications. Jackie Stacey in her 1988 essay *Desperately Seeking Difference* says of the relationship between the women,

This formation contradicts the dominant convention within Hollywood cinema whereby the spectator is said to be inscribed

within the look and desire of the male protagonist. What interests me about [this] film is the question of the pleasures for the female spectator, who is invited to look or gaze with one female character at another, in an interchange of feminine fascination. This fascination is neither purely identification with the other women, nor the desire for her in the strictly erotic sense of the word. It is a desire to see, to know and become more like an idealized feminine other, in a context where difference between the two women is repeatedly reestablished.

(p125)

Like Charlotte in *Now, Voyager* and Erica in *An Unmarried Woman*, Roberta once again voluntarily undergoes a kind of transformation in order to move away from her 'desperate reality'. Whereas the other women embark on a "revamping" of their former selves, Roberta acquires the identity of someone completely new. However, it is in this unorthodox transformation that her desire to "seek Susan" is inherently satisfied.

Jackie Stacey engages with the concept of 'desperation' for the first time in popular film literature. A response to Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Stacey's article is centered largely on issues of gendered spectatorship in popular narrative cinema. She poses the following question and challenges an oversight, and from here attempts to suggest some of the theoretical reasons for this neglect, suggesting that, "if these pleasures [discussed by Mulvey] have been organized in accordance with the needs, desires and fears of heterosexual masculinity, then what is the place of women's desire

towards *women* within the analysis of narrative cinema?" (1992, p112). Stacey begins with a brief account of Mulvey's theories of female spectatorship, turning then to her own discussion and asking readers to consider whether or not the conventions of a gaze between women are the same as those present in the traditional understandings of the gaze that Mulvey describes - spectator identification with the male protagonist and his objectification of the female figure via the 'male gaze'. Stacey then moves into discussion of her case study films, *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the focus here being on the former and the use of the term 'desperate'. She first makes apparent the need to clearly separate gender identification and sexuality, terms, which she considers are too often lumped together under the category of sexual difference. Secondly, she reiterates that she is neither labeling nor discussing these texts as "lesbian films", but simply wants to investigate all potential avenues for pleasure for female spectatorship - the female gaze as understood as either a desiring, or an admiring gaze.

Stacey acknowledges three ways in which we can understand the function of the female gaze - firstly, through the lesbian narrative film, secondly, from the position of the lesbian spectator, and finally, through the gaze between female characters in narrative cinema aimed at all women. The latter is relevant to a discussion of *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Having identified the looking relations between Roberta and Susan as unorthodox, Stacey moves to look at the film specifically. She says of the unorthodox character relationship, "Having developed her own fantasy narrative about Susan by reading the personal advertisement, Roberta acts upon her desire to be desperate and becomes entangled in Susan's life" (p126).



This is the first moment that the term ‘desperate’ is used in this essay, and appears to refer to the seemingly desperate acts played out by Roberta, who is stuck in her monotonous reality and desiring - so desperately- something outside of that. Desperation lies fundamentally in the style with which Roberta executes her “seeking of Susan”- the spying, the following and even the purchasing and wearing of Susan’s leather jacket.

Stacey then moves on to discuss the active nature of Roberta’s desperation, suggesting that Roberta is encompassing the traits of a male protagonist simply by addressing her desperation so readily. She acknowledges her desperation throughout the film and strives to satisfy this. The dialogue between Roberta and Leslie (Laurie Metcalf) in the hair salon at the start of the film reinforces this active masculine position:

**Roberta:** Here it is, a message from Jim.

[Reading the newspaper]

**Roberta:** “Desperately seeking Susan. Meet me, four o’clock, Battery Park. Keep the faith. Love, Jim.”

**Leslie:** Jim? Susan? Do you know these people?

**Roberta:** They send messages through the personal ads, that’s how they hook up. Last year she was in Mexico City, then Los Angeles, and now New York. Desperate. I love that word.

**Leslie:** Everyone I know is desperate, except for you.

**Roberta:** I'm desperate!

**Leslie:** Ha!

**Roberta:** Well, sort of.

It is Roberta's desire to experience desperation that leads to her becoming so actively involved in Susan's life. Desperation here can be equated with notions of desire - the desire for something outside of the realities of everyday life.

Not only is the narrative propelled structurally by Roberta's desire, but almost all the spectator sees of Susan at the beginning of the film is revealed through Roberta's fantasy. The narrativisation of her desires positions her as the central figure for spectator identification: through her desire we seek, and we see, Susan.

(Kuhn 1986, p126)

The male characters in *Desperately Seeking Susan* function within a binary of their own - Gary (Mark Blum), the focus in Roberta's life before her accident, and Des (Aiden Quinn), with whom she becomes involved after the accident. The film opens with a montage of beauty treatments and we meet Roberta for the first time at the salon discussing the relationship between strangers Susan and Jim in the personals. Her interest in the unorthodox romance between the couple suggests her desperation to escape the banal realities of her life with Gary. Although Gary appears to be able to provide her with whatever she desires (money, a nice house, fancy dinner parties), the marriage lacks

excitement and adventure, which Roberta so obviously craves. Gary is both arrogant and oblivious when it comes to his wife, and his passion appears to stem only from matters concerning business and finance, for example he sends Roberta to town to pick up a car part and reminds her, “tell the guy you’re my wife because we put a sauna in the owners apartment and he’s given us a great price”. He comments further when he sees Roberta wearing Susan’s jacket, “You bought a used jacket? What are we? Poor?”

Life with Gary is the ‘desperate reality’ in which Roberta finds herself, so it is not surprising that Susan and Jim’s mysterious relationship so easily intrigues her. The anonymity of the personal ads allows Roberta to experience excitement in her life vicariously through the courtship of another couple. Until the moment of her accident, Roberta keeps a distance between herself and the couple, marking her uncertainty surrounding both the experience itself as the lack of internal confidence she feels due to her repressed life with Gary. ‘Desperate fantasy’ for Roberta is only able to surface in a state of amnesia, however, her favorable reaction to her new life with Des - both on an emotional and physical level - results in her leaving her past with Gary behind, even when her mind returns to its former state.

Des is a scruffy but sensitive movie projectionist who Roberta encounters during her pursuit of Susan and Jim. Although at first unsure about his relaxed lifestyle, she soon becomes both intrigued by and accustomed to his accommodating clutter. Whereas Gary often placed Roberta as his second priority, Des shows immense passion and adoration towards her. Little narrative information is revealed about Des’s character; however, we

can make assumptions about him based on the way he is represented visually. His dark hair and dark attire add a kind of mystery to his character, which contrasts significantly with Gary, who dresses somewhat flamboyantly in comparison. We also witness brief shots of Des's nude backside after he and Roberta have made love, suggesting an open sexuality against which Gary failed to conform. Throughout the course of the narrative Roberta transforms significantly, both in terms of her emotional state and her appearance. In the film's opening beauty parlor scene, Roberta announces that she wishes she was desperate, however, on learning what it feels like to experience the alternative (with Des), she realizes she was desperate after all. Over the course of the narrative, Roberta has transformed from a quietly desperate housewife, into an independent, confident and sexually liberated woman, a change that is paralleled significantly with her shift in love interest.

#### iv. **Bridget Jones' Diary**

Thank you, Daniel, that is very good to know. But if staying here means working within 10 yards of you, frankly, I'd rather have a job wiping Saddam Hussein's arse.

(Bridget Jones)

So far, desperation has been discussed as a thematic element of the melodrama and the woman's film, with its beginnings in *Now, Voyager*. Here, we see desperation being aligned closely with notions of transformation and heterosexual romance, providing a useful framework against which to map other desperation narratives. *An Unmarried*

*Woman* (1978) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), build on these ideas, each centered around a female character trying to come to terms with her own desperation. It is here that we can begin to make the connection with some more contemporary representations of “the desperate” in Sharon Maguire’s 2001 film *Bridget Jones Diary* and more recently in Marc Cherry’s *Desperate Housewives*. The former is based on Helen Fielding’s best-selling Zeitgeist book by the same name. Written in 1996, Fielding’s novel pays homage to perhaps an even earlier desperation narrative, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a connection described by Suzanne Ferriss in her 2006 book *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*,

Fielding’s *Bridget Jones* novels emulate Austen’s in presenting the interior states of their female characters. Both writers present intelligent but misguided women who learn the error of their perceptions of men and discover true love in the process.

(p75)

Perhaps the epitome of a woman’s desperation, the film of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, presents us with Bridget (Renee Zellweger), a pop culture icon, who constantly struggles against her age, her weight, her job, her lack of a man, and her many imperfections. One reviewer comments on Bridget’s character,

Bridget Jones is desperately seeking companionship. This tangible desperation leads her right into the oncoming paths of two seemingly inept, semi-available males... This is by no

means another one of those “torn between two lovers” chick films. Instead, it has much more to do with Jones and her underlying quest to find personal fulfillment.

(McIntosh, D, 2007)

Set in a period commonly referred to as third-wave feminism, Bridget is presented as desperate for the Western definition of perfection- maintaining the perfect appearance, being part of a perfect family and, ultimately, gazing upon and securing the perfect man. Building on Stacey’s argument, we recognize the subject as desperate through the way she gazes longingly at he who she desires. Like Charlotte in *Now, Voyager* and Erica in *An Unmarried Woman*, we meet Bridget at a point in her life when she feels like she lacks any real control. Aside from her own personal issues she is also dealing with the breakdown of her parent’s marriage. Bridget’s transformation stems largely from positive affirmation from the opposite sex, and although Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) proves an unfavorable partner, it is his flirtatious advances early in the narrative that give Bridget the confidence boost that she needs to transform her life. We witness transformation on a physical level as we watch her groom for her date- we see a montage of ‘beautifying’ activities concluded humorously with Bridget desperately squeezing into undersized underwear. Transformation occurs on a deeper level also, with Bridget gaining the self confidence she needs to feel comfortable in her own body, the strength to cut back on bad foods and cigarettes and, most drastically after Daniel has broken her heart, the strength to resign from her job in the publishing house and seek employment elsewhere.

Desperate reality for Bridget is evident from the state she is in when we first meet her. The film opens rather appropriately with a lip-sync performance of Celine Dion's *All By Myself*, epitomizing for audiences the extent of Bridget's desperation. Through the course of the narrative Bridget encounters two potential relationships and she must make a choice between her arrogantly charming boss Daniel Cleaver who cheats on her with younger colleague, or the stubbornly handsome Mark Darcy (Colin Firth), who in fact loves her "just as she is". We could in fact look at men as existing on opposing sides of this desperate binary. Daniel Cleaver, although providing momentary satisfaction and happiness, acts as a metaphor for Bridget's desperate reality. She is constantly trying to transform into something she is not, from the struggle to fit into "slimming panties" before their first date, to the risqué Playboy Bunny costume she adorns for a family BBQ. Bridget is consistently represented as trying to transform herself into that which she feels will hold the attention of Daniel. On the flipside, however, although Bridget does not realize it till the concluding scenes of the film, Mark Darcy represents a desperate fantasy. He has a successful career, a stable family, and although exposed frequently to Bridget's many "flaws", he embraces her as is, without requiring her to transform in any way. Although we may know from prior knowledge of the film's sequel (*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, 2004) that desperation continues further in the relationship between Bridget and Mark, the first film is temporarily resolved for us through the coming together of the heterosexual couple and Bridget's desperation is temporarily overcome. Closure, in terms of the heterosexual relationship, varies throughout each of the films. In both *Now, Voyager* and *An Unmarried Women* we are left questioning the fate of the relationship between the female protagonist and her leading man, however, *Desperately*

*Seeking Susan* and *Bridget Jones Dairy*, in contrast, conclude with the coming-together of the heterosexual couple.

Bridget's lipsync performance at the beginning of the film suggests an immediate narrative preoccupation with the search for the perfect man. Bridget appears in a state of utter desperation, and the ringing in of the New Year sees her resolve to make the necessary changes in order to find love. Like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the positions of the protagonist male characters in *Bridget Jones' Diary* shift significantly through the course of the narrative. When Bridget's boss, Daniel Cleaver, begins his flirtatious advances towards Bridget it appears that her luck is changing. Daniel is handsome, charming and successful, and it is not long before Bridget begins to fall in love with him. Although seemingly genuine in his intentions, it is not long before Bridget becomes aware of Daniel's flaws, particularly his infidelity. The character of Mark Darcy, who is wrongly labeled as a home-wrecker by Daniel in the early stages of the film, shifts to the forefront in the second half of the narrative. First impressions of Mark Darcy suggest a dry arrogance, a characterization reinforced to us by Daniel's accusations, however, his subtle flirtations and gestures in the middle of the film suggest that perhaps there is more to his character than is initially obvious.

The contrast between the two male characters is epitomized when Bridget and Daniel embark on their "mini-break" only to find Mark and his partner Natasha (Embeth Davidtz) residing at the same hotel. The two couples are framed in such a way that their differences, in terms of both appearance and personality are made explicitly obvious.



Whereas Daniel is represented as intoxicated, reciting crude limericks with a cigarette hanging from his lip, Mark is much more calm, engaging in conversation with Natasha who sits under a parasol. It is at this point that the binary sits temporarily, with Daniel Cleaver positioned as the object of Bridget's desperate fantasy, a position that is soon disrupted, on learning of his infidelity. Like Erica's character in *An Unmarried Woman*, this point in the narrative sees Bridget as once again alone. When Mark arrives unexpectedly at Bridget's apartment as she prepares a meal for her friends, we witness a more favorable side to his character. We learn that underneath his pompous exterior lies a sweetness and sensitivity shaded by the constant guard put up to avoid further hurt and disappointment. Daniel once again interrupts Bridget's happiness as he arrives, unannounced, at the dinner party. It is at this point that the two men confront each other for the first time, literally fighting for Bridget's affections. Whereas the two men were contrasted heavily in the rowboat scene, they are represented as almost unidentifiable as they brawl. On learning the true reasons behind Mark and Daniel's hatred towards each other, Bridget comes to realize that it is in fact Mark who she desires. In the film's conclusion it is Daniel who occupies the position of desperate reality. He is arrogant, deceitful and constantly sends Bridget into a debilitating self-doubt. Once the rumors of his unfavorable character are cast aside, Mark becomes the protagonist in Bridget's desperate fantasy.

Bridget's transformation as a character can be mapped against her two primary relationships in the film. In the beginning of the film Bridget is presented as unhappy and uncertain, a state for which her relationship with Daniel Cleaver acts as a metaphor. The

confidence and happiness achieved through her reconciliation with Mark is obvious in the film's closing scene. Bridget stands in a snowy street in a coat, leopard print underwear and a pair of sneakers. In a moment such as this, where everything in Bridget's life seems perfectly clear, she must overcome personal insecurities and win back the man. She does so, and her desperate fantasy is assured, with a new diary representing their fresh start as a couple.

These four films highlight for us that 'desperation' is not a new concept. They remind us of the historical origins of desire, suffering, and anxiety experienced by the women in *Desperate Housewives* as a result of their relationships with male characters. Each film reinforces Basinger's notion of a woman at the centre of her universe; the films bring women's issues to the forefront and present different ways in which these problems can be overcome. These "problems" faced by women together make for what I collaboratively term "desperation", and can be understood in terms of two halves of a binary - desperate realities and desperate fantasies. Each protagonist female, I argue, desires something outside of the reality in which they are situated, and it is this craving something different that stimulates both looks and acts of desperation within the narrative. As can be seen from these examples, desperation is not a new concept. The concept has, however, been moved explicitly to the forefront with the vast popularity of *Desperate Housewives* since its US release in 2004. As is the case in *Now, Voyager*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *Bridget Jones Diary*, desperation stems primarily from engagement (or lack thereof!) with men. As is the case with each of these films, disappointment from and/or disagreement with a male character leads to the

female desperately seeking something to stimulate them outside of this troubled reality.

We experience this on a more complex level in *Desperate Housewives*, with desperation existing on multiple levels due to its multi-cast production of protagonist characters.

*Desperate Housewives* shares with these films the inclusion of active male characters that aid in driving the narrative. Brian Singleton says of the male characters in *Desperate Housewives*,

The daytime spectacle for the wives of Wisteria Lane is constituted by samples of heroic masculinity that come to replace husbands and partners. These daytime arrivals are primary examples of male agency, with their unclothed bodies, performing physical tasks and assuming the dominant role in sexual encounters. These men are offered for scopic delight, most as eye candy; they intercede in the drama of the lane from the periphery, entering the space of female desire, and they negotiate that space according to the housewives needs.

(p106)

While Singleton suggests that the show's "heroic men" have agency, it can be contended that, instead, they are merely screens onto which the housewives *project* their desperation. These earlier films allow us to measure the development of desperation across the fields of the woman's film and 'chick flicks'. By looking in depth at these forerunners we can map the heritage for *Desperate Housewives* and recognize the extent to which desperation is such a prominent state for women in film and television.

In Chapter one I engaged briefly with Christine Geraghty's discussion of the increasing importance of the male viewer, and therefore masculine themes and interests within the soap opera genre. Geraghty sites primetime soap opera *Dallas*, first aired in 1978, as having brought men's issues to the forefront for the first time, with the narrative centered around the family dysfunctions and business dealings of oil mogul J.R. Ewing. I argue that notions of female desperation, as previously discussed are aligned closely with the increased narrative inclusion of male characters and male-centered themes. By looking at the way these two ideas have been juxtaposed throughout a brief history of the woman's film, using the examples previously discussed, and then aligning these ideas with the 'desperate reality versus desperate fantasy' binary, we can provide a base for discussing the male characters in *Desperate Housewives*. I will look at the role of male characters and, while also keeping in mind their transformation from the opening to the closing scenes, explore how each fit into these two interdependent categories. The 'desperate reality' versus 'desperate fantasy' as discussed in chapter two, makes reference to a two-sided situation each of the protagonist women faces with relation to the men in her life. One's 'desperate reality' refers to the banal realities of everyday life including, as described earlier, strained relationships, struggling marriages, work issues, financial woes, and fading sex lives. 'Desperate fantasy' on the other hand, makes reference to the more pleasurable elements of life including romance, sex, generosity, passion and reciprocated desire. Through looking at the way this binary can be applied to the four case study films previously referenced, we can then use it to better understand the position of men in relation to the female protagonists of *Desperate Housewives*.

## I. Chapter Four

### Catalysts for Desperation: The Men in *Desperate Housewives*

The men in *Desperate Housewives* play a vital role in the construction of what has been defined in this thesis as a narrative of desperation. The show prides itself on its comprehensive representation of the lives of women in suburbia; however, I argue that the male characters in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative are of equal importance. They are the catalysts for a narrative of desperation in that their actions and/or reactions towards the series' protagonist females evoke the all important feelings of desire, suffering and anxiety. Although the male characters in *Now, Voyager, An Unmarried Woman, Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *Bridget Jones' Diary* play an integral role in the film's construction, they are frequently overlooked due to the film's generic classification as 'woman's film' or 'chick flick'. The generic hybridity of *Desperate Housewives* and its contemporary television counterparts allows for the consideration of the male characters, making their stories more prominent and bringing their actions and anxieties to the forefront. The men in *Desperate Housewives* are considered only briefly in critical discussion thus creating a space for original contribution.

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's 2006 collection *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence* is the sole academic literary contribution to discussion on *Desperate Housewives* thus far. This book offers a collection of essays ranging from very informal, opinion-based pieces to the more critical arguments, however, there is one subject that is notably excluded - the men. Although Brian Singleton briefly develops the

role of the male in terms of his place as an object of desire for women, this collection fails to consider the extremely important role of the male as a *catalyst* for female desperation. I will now summarize McCabe and Akass's collection, in an attempt to make this exclusion clear thus opening up a space for my own contribution. Rather than look at each essay chronologically, I will approach the collection thematically in terms of its contributions to discussions of genre, gender, and narrative whilst taking into account the show's various television and film influences. With a television premise in mind first, 'Television and Genre' refers to those essays in the collection that discuss how genres such as soap opera and reality television influence the series' narrative, 'Television and Gender' looks at the texts feminist influence, while 'Television and Narrative' focuses on those essays in the collection dedicated to various narrative themes in *Desperate Housewives*. Shifting then to the impact of film on the *Desperate Housewives* narrative this summary then highlights notions of generic hybridity.

#### **i. Television and Genre**

Rosalind Coward in her chapter *Still Desperate: Popular Television and the Female Zeitgeist* situates *Desperate Housewives* firmly within the realm of soap opera. Taking into consideration both narrative impact and audience demographics, Coward discusses the changing role of women and how these changes have been represented in soap opera over time. She cites *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Thirtysomething*, and *Sex and the City* as influential *Zeitgeist* texts that have been "imbued with female preoccupations of their moment" (p32). She argues that *Desperate Housewives*, like these soap opera predecessors, puts

sexual and familial relations at the forefront thus providing a place for women to find the concerns of their own lives reflected back to them.

While soap opera is considered to be the most obvious of genre influences, Sharon Sharp's chapter *Disciplining the Housewife in Desperate Housewives and Domestic Reality Television* places home-based reality television at the forefront. Using shows such as *Super Nanny* and *Wife Swap* as examples, Sharp suggests that while many sitcoms portray the home as happy and harmonious, the 'real' housewives in these series' are often "ambivalent, frustrated, overworked, neurotic and unhappy" (p120). Sharp focuses her argument on two contrasting characters - Lynette, who is openly struggling with motherhood, and Bree, who strives to keep up appearances despite her family dysfunction - and looks at how *Desperate Housewives* resonates with the reality television model through its expression of housewife dissatisfaction that is commonly masked in sitcom. She states that, "despite women's movement's efforts to liberate women from the exile of the domestic sphere, *Desperate Housewives*, like domestic reality TV, returns women to the home" (p122).

With a 'reality' premise in mind, Stacy Gills and Melanie Waters credit the popular talk-show genre as influencing a narrative of confession. Their essay, *Mother, Home and Heaven: Nostalgia, Confession and Motherhood in Desperate Housewives*, focuses on the anxiety surrounding conformity and strives to give authority to feminine confession. Gills and Waters suggest that the *Desperate Housewives* narrative fluctuates between confession (Mary-Alice's posthumous confessions) and anti-confession, which is made

explicit during the housewives weekly poker games. Anti-confession here refers to the “art of silence...of withholding personal information” (p196), thus positioning neighborhood gossip at the forefront.

## ii. Television and Gender

*Desperate Housewives* as a text articulates an honest reality for many women, while others view the show as simply pessimistic. Ashley Sayeau in her essay *Having it all: Desperate Housewives' Flimsy Feminism*, considers the “schizophrenic and politically suspect way of discussing women” (p43). Sayeau criticizes the show’s emphasis on female desperation as opposed to other more positive qualities such as courage and strength. She terms this position “faux feminism” (p44) and comments that although the show is concerned with the frustrations and hardships of today’s woman, it fails to offer any favorable alternatives.

Kim Akass furthers feminist discussion in her essay *Still Desperate after all these Years: The Post-feminist Mystique and Maternal Dilemmas*. Akass addresses the term desperation with regard to each of the main characters and how their actions and behaviors have become so regularly referred to outside of the narrative, posing the questions, “Why would any sane woman swap a life of independence for one of quiet desperation like those lived on Wisteria Lane” (p49)? Akass makes a connection between *Desperate Housewives* and Betty Freidan’s 1963 text *The Feminine Mystique*, with regard to what constitutes female fulfillment, suggesting that the show’s narrative has transitioned back to a period where ‘marriage and children’ are of high priority. She then



moves into a discussion of the rhetoric of choice, whereby a woman can choose to either focus on a family or an occupation, suggesting that the working day as we know it is structured in such a way that she cannot realistically do both. Lynette Scarvo is presented as facing this dilemma. Akass describes Lynette's desperation at having to be a stay-at-home-mum suggesting that, "her spontaneous punch to the jaw (1:1) when Tom attempts to have unprotected sex with her and risk another pregnancy shows just how disenchanted Lynette is with her role" (p55). Akass makes significant parallels between Lynette and Freidan's women who struggled to discuss the ongoing desperation of their lives, and concludes with the following questions surrounding this "full circle to a post-feminist mystique" (p57), "the ladies of Wisteria Lane may be desperate, but is it any surprise when we find that equality no longer extends to them"(p57)?

In her essay *What is it with that hair? Bree Van de Kamp and Policing Contemporary Femininity*, Janet McCabe discusses the problems that exist with contemporary feminism focusing primarily on the aesthetics of Bree Van de Kamp. McCabe discusses the image of perfection that Bree projects to the rest of Wisteria Lane, and uses her conversation with her therapist to reinforce this farce, "What does it matter, she confesses to Dr Albert Goldfine, if she settles for a life of 'repression and denial' so long as she can host 'civilized and elegant' dinner parties" (p75)? McCabe builds on this and moves to discuss the constant struggle for the show's protagonists to achieve a feminine ideal, referring once again to Betty Freidan who describes "the discrepancy between how women's lives are perceived and how they really are" (p79). Bree Van de Kamp cements this two-fold subject position. McCabe then moves to look at the culture of Bree Van de Kamp outside

of the series, and discusses the way in which images in the media commonly associate Bree's character with fashion, transformation, and self-improvement.

Niall Richardson furthers discussion on gender through the image of Bree Van de Kamp in her article *As Kamp as Bree: Post-feminist camp in Desperate Housewives*. Richardson focuses Susan Sontag's definition of 'camp', looks at the politics surrounding the term, and suggests its inclusion in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative is essentially for comic effect. Richardson notes Sontag's failure to include issues of gender in her definition, describing camp as "a way of seeing the world...in terms of the degree of artifice; of stylization" (p89), and thus, with Bree in mind as a personification for camp in a gender-based context, takes Sontag's definition a step further suggesting that "camp is an ironic performance of gender; it is gender which camp represents in terms of artifice or stylization": (p90). Richardson suggests that Bree is represented in terms of what she does rather than how she feels; she acknowledges her own personal desperation but continues to perform her immaculately groomed role to its very limits.

### iii. Television and Narrative

Domesticity and motherhood are both elements of the *Desperate Housewives* narrative that are mentioned at various points in McCabe and Akass's collection, however, it is Anna Marie Bautista who brings these themes to the forefront in her essay *Desperation and Domesticity: Reconfiguring the 'happy housewife' in Desperate Housewives*. She begins her discussion with Betty Freidan's famous quote, "It is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women" (p156) in an

attempt to indicate a transition from the 1950s notion of the 'happy housewife' to current discourses of motherhood and domesticity that are more commonly associated with "ambivalence, anxiety, confusion, [and] guilt". Bautista attempts to challenge notions of the 'happy housewife' and argues that Bree's role in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative is intended to parody the negative implications of domestic perfection. Bree, Bautista argues, personifies the ongoing complications surrounding the woman's place in the domestic realm.

Both Kristian T. Kahn and David Lavery identify the role of politics in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative, however, they approach this inclusion in vastly different ways. David Lavery in his piece '*W* stands for women, or is it Wisteria?: Watching *Desperate Housewives* with Bush 43', transcribes a fictional recording of President George W. Bush commenting on the pilot episode of *Desperate Housewives* in an attempt to highlight the political landscape at the time. Kahn takes a more academic approach to political influence in his article, *Queer dilemmas: The 'right' ideology and homosexual representation in Desperate Housewives*, and argues that the show's narrative often reflects the conservative values of the Bush administration. This conservatism, he argues, is echoed through the repression of homosexuality, stating that "while the programme does have both a left - and a right wing audience - the conservative (heterosexual) ideology of the American right is actually reinforced through the 'seemingly liberal' (sexual) transgressions acted out in the series" (p95). The show both introduces homosexuality and also attempts to repress it thus restoring heteronormativity and the right-wing ideals of the Bush regime.

The collection then moves to look at the subversive narrative in Samuel Chamber's essay *Desperately Straight: The Subversive Sexual Politics of Desperate Housewives*. He begins with a discussion of the term 'subversion', and addresses the way in which *Desperate Housewives* manages to be subversive from the inside out, whilst at the same time being "about as straight as one can possibly conceive" (p61). He recognizes that subversion in this context can be considered both in terms of the show's narrative as well as the various associations made in the real world. As a narrative, *Desperate Housewives* manages to subvert heteronormativity through its injection of risqué characters and storylines into the immaculate Wisteria Lane. Chambers reinforces this notion, stating that, "challenging the norm from the centre has the potential to wield a much greater force than questioning the norm from its margins" (p72). The focus then shifts to look at the *Desperate Housewives* phenomenon as existing outside of the text itself. Chambers argues that although the media promote the show as straight, with its suburban housewives in traditional roles, the actions and reactions of the cast and crew outside of the show aid in questioning the subversive nature of the text even further, for example rumors surrounding Marcia Cross's (Bree Van de Kamp) sexuality. Using the Van de Kamp family as a kind of case study, he discusses subversive issues such as Andrew's homosexuality, Rex's S and M fetishes, and Bree's bizarre obsession with maintaining her perfect family image. Chambers summarizes with the following,

In both its narrative and dialogical structure *Desperate Housewives* makes a concerted effort to maintain the surface

appearance of both heterosexual normality and traditional gender roles. However, in the reading offered here this is precisely the point: the show *tries so hard* to uphold straightness that it betrays itself. The reason that Wisteria Lane proves something less than straight lies in the very desperation to remain straight.

(p70)

#### iv. Film Influence

Although the impact of film on the *Desperate Housewives* narrative is not given explicit attention, various contributors recognize the hybridity of such a show and thus take various generic influences into account. Most of the contributing scholars mention film in passing as they situate *Desperate Housewives* within the realm of television, for example Rosalind Coward in her discussion of the female zeitgeist notes that the show echoes such films as *American Beauty* (1999) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and Janet McCabe as she parallels Bree's situation with that of a "Sirkian melodrama" (p79), while others expand on film's influence in more detail.

Judith Lancioni brings film genre to the forefront as she explores the term 'dramedy' in her essay *Murder and Mayhem on Wisteria Lane: A Study of genre and cultural context in Desperate Housewives*. Dramedy, she suggests, "fosters the weaving together of comic and dramatic elements across storylines, thus creating a highly complex text" (p131), and is initially evident in the show's "serio/comic" (p130) opening credits. Lancioni

acknowledges that dramedy can be used to describe the show as a whole as well as each of the characters' individual situations. She uses Bree's character as a focal point suggesting that "while Bree's domestic achievements may be funny by virtue of their excessiveness, their effects are rooted in tragedy" (p132). Lancioni argues that by fusing together genres that would usually work in opposition to each other, *Desperate Housewives* is essentially integrating both feminist and post-feminist ideologies thus creating paradoxical representations of the modern woman.

With feminist issues in mind the focus then turns to Sherryl Wilson who, in her article *White Picket Fences, domestic containment and female subjectivity: The quest for romantic love*, contests that *Desperate Housewives* reasserts patriarchal romantic ideals rather than attempting to break away from them. The influence of film is present here as Wilson acknowledges both the fairytale and the crime narrative as playing an important role in the show's construction. Using Susan Mayer and Gabrielle Solis as case studies here Wilson describes how the show offers viewers the chance to escape from the realities of contemporary existence and immerse themselves in *Desperate Housewives* and the possibility of living happily ever after. The female character is discussed further as Sherianne Shuler, M. Chad McBride, and Erika L. Kirby use *Sex and the City* as a starting point for a discussion of the female friendship narrative. *Sex and the City*, they argue, highlights the value of female friendship thus situating the "friendships" in *Desperate Housewives* as merely façade reminiscent of adolescent friendship films such as *Mean Girls* (2004). Shuler, McBride and Kirby argue that *Desperate Housewives* lacks a sense of true community in comparison to its New York City-based counterpart

suggesting that, “the women of *Desperate Housewives* seem to be no more than teenagers with families and large houses, and a comparison can be drawn between their friendships, the relationships among adolescent girls and the darker side of female friendships - gossiping, competing, teasing and forming cliques” (p186).

Deborah Jermyn brings genre hybridity to the forefront in her essay *Dying to tell you something: Post-humous narration and female omniscience in Desperate Housewives*. She begins her discussion with a celebration of the woman’s voice through Mary-Alice’s post-humous narration, suggesting a kind of liberation from the constraints of patriarchal culture. Jermyn acknowledges that the voiceover is a narrative trait common in film rather than television and shifts her focus to the issue of generic hybridity, suggesting that *Desperate Housewives* draws on both film and television conventions. Jermyn notes various similarities between the function of the voiceover in *Desperate Housewives* and that of film noir and the 1940s woman’s film. While the voiceover in film noir is typically indicative of anchoring protagonist subjectivity, voiceover in this context is heavily associated with notions of knowledge, insight, and the anticipation of character development. Mary-Alice holds what Jermyn describes as a “superior position of knowledge” (p174), however, withholds various information in favor of commenting on the gossip and scandal of Wisteria Lane, thus furthering the liberation of the female voice.

Generic hybridity is discussed further in Jennifer L. Pozner and Jessica Seigel’s conversational piece, *Desperately Debating Housewives* that is essentially an ongoing

debate between friends surrounding the state of feminism as portrayed in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative. Amidst this debate is brief mention of the show's hybridity which, although connoted negatively, is indicative of the complexity of such a narrative. Pozner and Seigel cite 'Jenn' as she summarizes life on Wisteria Lane as one of, "murder, paedophilia, adultery, prostitution and drug abuse, all on one fabulously landscaped suburban street" (p211). Although informal in its execution, Pozner and Seigel's piece summarizes what is a valuable collection of academic contributions that effectively addresses the two contrasting sides of the debate surrounding the complex and seemingly contradictory *Desperate Housewives* narrative.

#### v. Exclusions

*Desperate Housewives* reverses traditional gender roles by positioning the female as the protagonist, or subject, with men positioned as the objects. Arguing that hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is determined primarily by the female gaze, Brian Singleton, in his essay *Hunters, Heroes, and the Hegemonically Masculine Fantasies of Desperate Housewives* briefly considers the visual function of each of the show's male characters. Although Singleton raises many valid points about the representation of the men in *Desperate Housewives*, he fails to expand on detail. Singleton does not talk about the men in detail, does not consider their narrative functions, does not take into account Paul Young's character, who (although he is not visually desirable), plays a crucial role in the goings-on in Wisteria Lane, and finally, Singleton does not consider the men's place as catalysts for female desperation. This essay, both individually and in terms of the wider collection, positions the male characters as of secondary importance to their female



counterparts. It is these exclusions, whether intended or not, that create an opportunity for an original contribution thus making way for the work that follows.

#### vi. **Textual Analysis**

Due to the male characters' obvious lack of community throughout the course of the *Desperate Housewives* narrative, I will divide this textual analysis into three distinct categories - 'The Body' (Mike Delfino and John Rowland), 'The Briefcase' (Rex Van de Kamp, Tom Scarvo and Carlos Solis), and 'The Bad Guy' (Paul Young), with each contributing to a more detailed understanding of the male subject. Firstly, I will define my template and offer a range of visual and narrative traits through which these categories can be easily recognized. Secondly, I will apply this template to the show's specific male characters, taking into consideration both their narrative and visual representation, eventually locating them within the 'Desperate Realities' and 'Desperate Fantasies' of the protagonist females.

### **Summary of Pilot Episode**

Before beginning with the textual analysis I have provided a summary of the pilot episode of the first season of *Desperate Housewives* as a point of reference. It is during this episode that we meet each of the male protagonists for the first time.

#### **Act One**

The episode opens with an establishing shot of Wisteria Lane. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping and people seem generally happy to be there. The camera then closes in on Paul Young's house and a voiceover begins introducing us to the show's narrator,

Mary-Alice Young (Brenda Strong). She begins to describe her day, followed by a montage of her household chores and activities. The mood soon changes as Mary-Alice takes a gun for a shoebox in her closet and unexpectedly shoots herself. Mary-Alice's neighbor Martha Huber (Christine Estabrook) hears the gunshot and alerts the authorities.

The episode then jumps forward in time to the day of Mary-Alice's wake. It is through their various arrivals to the wake that each of the protagonist females and their families are introduced. The first character introduced is Lynette Scarvo (Felicity Huffman). Lynette's bears a tiresome look as she struggles to keep up with her three young boys while pushing a pram with one hand and balancing a large plate of fried chicken in the other. Through the use of flashback we learn that Lynette is a formerly successful businesswoman whose career has been interrupted by the birth of her children. We see that she has a husband who spends his days at work, thus explaining his absence from the wake. Next we are introduced to Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria-Park) and her husband Carlos (Ricardo Chavira) outside of their extravagant mansion. Once again a flashback is used to show the couple's rapid courtship and immense wealth. As they walk to the wake and discuss heatedly the cost of Gabrielle's latest gift from Carlos we become aware of the fragile state of their marriage. Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross) is the next to arrive at the wake with disgruntled husband, Rex (Steven Culp), and her two children, Andrew (Shaun Pyfrom) and Danielle (Joy Lauren) in tow. As she presents Mary-Alice's husband Paul (Mark Moses) with freshly baked muffins, a montage of Bree's many talents is presented once again in the form a flashback. The next protagonist to be introduced is Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher). Susan appears frantic as she hurries out the door with her

daughter Julie (Andrea Bowen) and a dish of macaroni. The macaroni is used as a reoccurring motif to signify important events in a flashback on Susan's life. We learn that Susan's husband Karl (Richard Burgi) left her for another woman and that she is searching for a new man to spend her life with.

As Susan and Julie walk to the wake they discuss Mary-Alice's suicide and how unhappy she must have been. Susan joins the other women round the Young's dining room table and her mind flashes back to a happier time when Mary-Alice was there with them. In this scene the women discuss the various flaws in their husbands, which aids in setting the scene for what I have argued is the narrative of desperation. Mary-Alice says to the women, "We all have moments of desperation. But if we can face them head on then that's how we find out how strong we really are". The women discuss potential reasons for Mary-Alice's suicide. Paul overhears their conversation and appears concerned. The scene then moves to the dining room where Susan warns a new neighbor off eating her macaroni. He introduces himself as Mike Delfino (James Denton) and immediately the pair hit it off. As Lynette breastfeeds her daughter, Mrs. Huber announces that the three Scarvo boys are playing in the Young's swimming pool. When the boys fail to respond to her orders to get out of the pool, Lynette hitches up her dress and wades into the pool in her high heels to fish them out herself. Paul looks sinisterly down into the pool.

## **Act Two**

Julie Mayer 'accidentally' kicks a soccer ball into Mike's yard in order to create an excuse to interrogate him about his life and his relationship status. On learning he is

single she returns home and relays the information to her mother. Susan realizes how long it has been since she has dated and so plucks up the courage to take Mike a housewarming gift. Their liaison is soon interrupted by the show's fifth protagonist, Edie Brit (Nicolette Sheridan). Edie is presented as a sex-crazed serial divorcee and attempts to compete with Susan for Mike's affections.

The focus then moves to the Solis mansion where Carlos and Gabrielle argue. As Carlos leaves for work we are introduced to their young gardener, John Roland (Jesse Metcalfe) who pricks his finger on a rosebush. John observes as the couple continue to argue. Once Carlos has left the house, Gabrielle invites John in, kisses his finger in a provocative manner and the pair have sex on the dining room table. Dinnertime at the Van de Kamp house is the next point of call, and the mood is very formal in comparison to the Mayer and Solis households. Bree is presented as happy and appears oblivious to the negative atmosphere around her. Danielle asks why they can't be like other 'normal' families and eat normal meals, and Bree and Andrew argue about his mother's pedantic attitude towards food. Rex fails to support his wife during this argument.

Lynette begs husband Tom (Doug Savant) to come home as she attempts to manage her children during a chaotic trip to the grocery store,. As her twins steal a trolley and begin to run amuck, Lynnette runs into an old work colleague who asks about domestic life. She responds somewhat unconvincingly that it is the best job she has ever had as her boys knock over an old lady with their trolley. The scene shifts once again to the Solis household as Gabrielle and John lie together having just had sex. John and Gabrielle

discuss the reasons behind her marriage to Carlos. We learn that Gabrielle is unhappy in her marriage and worries that she will one day become as desperate as Mary-Alice.

Susan plucks up the courage to go over to Mike's to ask him out on a date and is surprised to see that Edie has got their first. In an attempt to distract Mike from Edie she lies about having a clog in her pipes and asks if he can come over to fix it. She then races home and attempts to create a clog out of Julie's science project. Mike comes over and fixes the 'problem'. In response to her children's criticisms, Bree moves out of her comfort zone and takes her family to the 'Saddle Ranch Chop House' for a meal. Rex excuses Andrew and Danielle to play video games and announces to Bree that he wants to get a divorce. Unsure of how to respond to this Bree goes to get Rex a salad and accidentally includes onions to which he is deathly allergic; Rex collapses. The attention shifts back to the Young house for the first time since the wake. Woken by noises outside, Paul's son Zach (Cody Kasch) moves to the window to see his father digging up the bottom of their swimming pool. The two exchange eye contact as if to suggest a family secret.

### **Act Three**

Tom Scarvo arrives home from his business trip. He immediately coaxes the boys into going outside to play with a football and whisks Lynette to the bedroom for sex. Lynette slaps Tom when he suggests risking not using a condom and suggests that he has no idea how hard it is to manage four young children. The scene then moves to Rex's ward at the hospital as he tells Bree he is sick of her being "so damn perfect all the time". Bree

excuses herself to the ward bathroom and cries, as Rex reminisces about the way their relationship used to be. Carlos checks the grass on his front lawn before he and Gabrielle leave for a party and complains that it has not been cut properly. On arriving at the party, Gabrielle bribes one of the wait staff to constantly serve Carlos drinks and escapes the party briefly to mow the lawns, thus preventing John from losing his job. Carlos examines the grass again the following morning and appears stumped.

As Susan shops for her groceries Mrs. Huber informs her of Edie Britt's date later that evening. Susan immediately suspects that Mike is the man that she is entertaining and rushes home to discuss the matter with Julie. She leaves her house with a measuring cup and walks to Edie's to borrow sugar and check up on the situation. While there she hears a couple upstairs and accidentally knocks over a candle in despair. Edie's house catches on fire and, unable to put it out, Susan frantically leaves with the measuring cup left behind as evidence. As Edie and the other residents of Wisteria Lane stand watching the house burn Susan sees Mike also observing the fire. Although she has just burnt Edie's house down, Susan is happy that she still has a chance at romance with Mike. Mike returns to his house and makes a mysterious phone call. He pulls a gun from his pocket and we swiftly realize that he is more than just a plumber.

Susan, Gabrielle, Lynette and Bree toast Mary-Alice with champagne as they finish cleaning out her clothes and belongings. A note falls out of one of the boxes and reads 'I know what you did. It makes me sick. I'm going to tell'. The women realize that Mary-Alice received the note on the day she died and so begins the mystery behind her suicide.

## **‘The Body’**

Mulvey assumes a (heterosexual) male protagonist and a (heterosexual) male spectator. What happens when the protagonist is a woman?

(Gamman and Marshment 1988, p5)

While Mulvey suggested that traditional looking relations place passivity upon the woman, the visual presentation of characters in *Desperate Housewives* suggests an alternative. With a show centered around the desires and anxieties of four female characters it is not surprising that men become the object of spectacle and the women take on the role of the voyeur. ‘The Body’ refers to those men in *Desperate Housewives* who are displayed as visually pleasing and are defined primarily by the way they look and the physical tasks they perform. While tanned and muscular torsos are the key visual signifiers of the men in this group their narrative involvement must not be overlooked. These men are presented as genuine in their intentions, immensely generous, and their characters often possess an enigma or secret of some kind. The women spend their time watching the men of Wisteria Lane, discussing their actions and attempting to de-code their secrets, whilst constantly dwelling over what these actions and secrets might come to mean. We can understand female spectatorship here as not just about pleasure but also about knowledge, thus reinforcing a divide - ‘to see’ and ‘to know’. Laura Mulvey furthers this idea in her work *Fetishism and Curiosity* where, using the Pandora’s box myth as a framework, she describes a look of curiosity,

Pandora's gesture of looking into forbidden space, the literal figuration of curiosity as looking in, becomes a figure for the desire to know rather than the desire to see.

(Mulvey 1996, p59)

Pandora's myth, like the *Desperate Housewives* narrative, combines enigma with a narrative of curiosity. Desperation in this case stems primarily from this curiosity. These spectacularly bodied men act as catalysts for desperation in that they act as screens on which the women of Wisteria Lane project their curiosities, their desires and their sexual fantasies.

### **Mike Delfino- 'Ruggedly Handsome'**

When Mike is first spotted by the women in Wisteria Lane (and by Susan in particular) he is seen as a new male in what is set up to be very much a female space. The women control the lane by their act of community...the new male, therefore, must be assimilated into the community of women and this is achieved through a mixture of fantasy and interrogation.

(Singleton 2006, p111)



Mike Delfino is thrust into Wisteria Lane at a point when the community is mourning the loss of their friend, the show's omniscient narrator, Mary-Alice Young. His awkward introduction to Susan Mayer during Mary-Alice's wake reinforces his recent arrival at the lane. Susan relays her encounter with the handsome stranger back to the other women, and it is not long before Mike is placed at the centre of scrutiny and intrigue.

Mike is presented as a handsome bachelor. When the women of the community learn he is in fact single, Mike soon becomes a frequent visual spectacle for the singletons of Wisteria and distanced 'eye-candy' for all others. Mike initially appears to live a simple life as a plumber, and similarities can be noted between Mike Delfino and Joan Mellen's description of men such as *Dirty Harry's* Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood)- "the carefree hero with a carefree attitude who earns his living with ease" (p25). He enjoys physical labor and is often presented as partaking in household tasks such as mowing and watering his lawn, with his muscular torso on display.

Mike's most frequently occupied position, however, is as subject to the three-fold female gaze of Susan Mayer, Edie Brit, and Susan's daughter Julie. Wisteria Lane's population of single women, including Susan and the notorious Edie Brit, immediately target Mike. Edie is represented as overtly sexual and active in her intentions. In the pilot episode Edie's sexualized introduction is made explicit through the use of a slow motion camera as she runs towards Mike for the first time. She enjoys flaunting her body with short skirts and low-cut tops, which she uses in combination with her sexualized execution of menial tasks such as washing her car, in an attempt to get what she wants. She is often

framed in the same shot as Mike, which is indicative of her overt confidence. Her 'opponent' Susan is presented as more modest in her presentation and much more passive in her intentions. In the pilot episode, Susan's timidity as she attempts to ask Mike out on a date is contrasted with Edie's intrusiveness at already having made herself comfortable in his home. Susan is framed separately from Mike, indicating an uncertainty and shyness. Mike shows little indication of where his affections lie as, during this scene, he both welcomes Edie into his home and is receptive to Susan's request for help with her pipes. In the second episode when Susan invites Mike to dinner at her house the two are still framed individually, once again reinforcing a shyness. On Mike's acceptance of the invitation, however, the camera begins to frame the two together, indicating a reciprocation of feelings and thus the gradual formation of a relationship. Although Edie is still often positioned both physically and emotionally as an obstacle, Susan and Mike's relationship slowly continues to grow.

Julie Mayer is positioned as a 'puck figure' who oversees the two women fighting for Mike's affection, and is often seen to be offering Susan advice, as well as creating opportunities for her and Mike to interact. Although appearing oblivious to her advances Mike has a flirtatious side when it comes to Susan. Whereas Susan attempts to flirt with Mike through gesture and action, our first experience of his reciprocation is with words, at a point when she is at her most vulnerable. Susan retells the story of Mike helping her after she locked herself outside naked and comments that he is a "perfect gentlemen", with his response being simply, "I wasn't a perfect gentleman. For what it's worth..."

Wow!” (1:3) Mike may fail to expand on any detail, yet he is always warning Susan that his life is complicated. It is this lack of information that spurs Susan’s curiosity.

Susan frequently watches Mike through windows, reinforcing a distance between the two of them. Whereas Edie offers Mike the chance to reciprocate the gaze, Susan’s look from the privacy of her kitchen can be seen to reverse traditional looking relations, placing herself as the active voyeur and Mike as the oblivious object. Julianne Pidduck discusses the use of windows in film adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels, in her chapter *The Woman at the Window* from her book *Contemporary Costume Film*. For Pidduck, the woman at the window signifies anticipation, desire and active female agency, and she suggests three key functions for windows in these films and we can aptly apply these ideas to *Desperate Housewives*.

Pidduck first describes the woman at the window as possessing feminine traits such as constraint and longing, an idea that we can relate directly to Susan as she looks curiously through the window at Mike. Secondly, she comments that windows often function as framing devices, and thirdly she describes the window as a device to separate gendered interior and exterior spaces. In *Desperate Housewives* the Mayer’s kitchen window is indicative of Susan’s restriction inside as an illustrator, in contrast to Mike’s preoccupation with the outdoors. Pidduck discusses how Austen’s women would often wait by the window for the arrival of an eligible suitor and, in a point that can be directly compared to its contemporary counterpart *Desperate Housewives*, suggests that, “In a cycle of work organized around female characters, who are both actually and

metaphorically 'housebound', windows and doors where arrivals and departures occur, provide focal points of narrative interest" (p26). The use of windows can also be seen to symbolize an obstacle, preventing Susan and Mike from advancing their relationship. She watches him, notes his actions and forms her own conclusions, however inaccurate they may be. As the spectator, we have a more privileged view of Mike's life than Susan does. We are aware of his role as an undercover cop and thus witness him as he liaises with mysterious colleagues, shows a peculiar interest in neighbors and their histories, and is shot whilst snooping around a local property.

The act of watching and being watched are both actions typical in film noir or detective narratives. As previously discussed, *Desperate Housewives* prides itself on generic hybridity and borrows various visual and narrative elements from film noir. Despite being initially presented as a rather simplistic character the darker aspects of Mike Delfino's personality are gradually revealed and various props aid in cementing his secret identity. The most prominent prop is Mike's dog Bongo. Bongo reinforces any masculine traits lost through a lack of heterosexual romance and is not only a valued companion but can be aligned closely with Mellen's discussion on men as well as notions of detective work or police investigation. Supporting this idea are other props that are consistently associated with Mike's character such as guns and an unexplained gunshot wound, maps, and mysterious phone calls and meetings with people whose identities are only disclosed later in the season. Our suspicion of Mike begins in the pilot as he returns to his house after the fire at Edie's. He removes a gun from his jacket and explains to an anonymous person that he is getting closer to finding out information. Aside from brief indicative

scenes such as this one, we experience the discrepancies surrounding Mike's character primarily through Susan, as her frustrations towards him grow.

Despite the discrepancies in Mike's behavior Susan is still attracted to him both on a physical and an emotional level. He is the object of her desperate fantasy and offers her a possible alternative to the monotony she faces in her day-to-day life. This position is strengthened when Mike is compared to Susan's ex-husband, Karl. Susan's relationship transition from Karl to Mike can be compared to Erica's journey in *An Unmarried Woman*. Karl, like Erica's husband Martin, leaves his wife for a younger woman and then attempts to rekindle the relationship in the latter part of the narrative. Mike, in comparison, bears a likeness to Erica's new love, Saul in that he arrives to the Lane and is able to restore Susan's faith in the heterosexual relationship. Karl's arrogance, abrasiveness, slick demeanor and sports car are met with Mike's kind nature, modesty, and the rugged handsomeness of a laborer. Susan's desperate reality is as a single mother, the consequence of Karl's lies and adultery during their marriage. Mike represents a new beginning for Susan, and although her friends are skeptical about his intentions, and secrets are gradually revealed, she fantasizes about a future with him.

Mike both relieves Susan's desperation and adds to it. When we meet Susan we understand that she is sick of being alone, she is desperate to find a partner, and then she meets Mike who looks to be someone to potentially fill this gap. Throughout the season however, Mike's suspicious actions and secrets simply add to Susan's desperation. She becomes desperate to know the truth and goes to various lengths to achieve this goal.

Mike is a complicated character. He is often framed outside of his home, which reinforces both his position as spectacle as well as his accessibility as a neighborhood plumber. On the rare occasion that we are with Mike inside his home the framing becomes more restricted, with the lack of artificial light used in these shots adding to his alternative persona as a mysteriously vengeful undercover cop. We can make comparisons between Mike and both *24*'s Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) and *Picnic*'s Hal Carter (William Holden) who have been discussed earlier in this thesis. Like Jack, Mike is positioned as the show's hero and takes his professional life very seriously. He will not hesitate to do anything necessary to protect a loved one, or seek revenge for their harm. At the same time, Mike's introduction to the lane reminds us of Hal Carter's introduction to the small Kansas town in *Picnic*. Both men are handsome bachelors who arrive unannounced and thus catch the local residents off guard. Like the stir caused as a result of Hal's arrival at the Labor Day picnic, Mike's arrival at Wisteria Lane causes vast amounts of intrigue and speculation.

In the final episode of the season Mike is represented as brutal and angry. It is not until Paul Young confesses to the truth about his crimes that we understand the justification for Mike's actions and secrets throughout the course of the season. We learn that this anger stems from a passion to seek revenge for the murder of an old love, Deirdra, and can assume that in the early stages of the following season, Susan too will learn the truth behind Mike's character and her desperate fantasy can become a reality.

## John Rowland- 'Wisteria's Toy Boy'

This idealistic young man picks her (Gabrielle) a perfect rose,  
tells her that he loves her, even buys her an engagement ring and  
asks her to marry him. His affection and openness make  
Gabrielle all more aware of what is missing in her marriage.

(Marc Cherry 2004, p66)

John is immediately presented to us as 'other' through factors such as his social position in Wisteria Lane, his age in comparison to the other protagonist characters, and most obviously his status as 'the other man' in Gabrielle Solis's illicit affair. John and Gabrielle's relationship is made apparent for us from the pilot episode and his naivety and vulnerability are immediately clear. We meet John in the pilot episode in what appears to be a reversal of traditional fairytale. He pricks his finger on a rosebush, instantly denoting both his position as the Solis's gardener and his relationship to Gabrielle as she kisses his finger better. A fairytale discourse surrounds John and Gabrielle's relationship as they attempt to both conceal and maintain a somewhat unrealistic romance. Their various liaisons reinforce this discourse as they subtly court each other and engage romantically, with their flawless bodies intertwined. Like the conclusion of a traditional fairytale, John is constantly striving for his happily ever after. In Gabrielle's mind, however, John is seen as nothing more than a toy boy who she uses to fill the void of companionship and sex that she lacks in her marriage to Carlos. Oedipal

undertones surround John and Gabrielle as she tends to his injuries in a motherly way and dictates the conditions of their affair in an almost disciplinary fashion. John's youthfulness is reinforced through questions such as, "Do you want me to leave my gym gear on like last time?" (1:3) John's age and schoolboy status are consistently referred to throughout the narrative. He describes Gabby to his friends as "a hot housewife" (1:9), attempts to seduce her in his trophy-clad bedroom, and is often found studying at Danielle Van de Kamp's house.

John is presented as naive and oblivious to the realities of providing for Gabrielle. John's employment as the Solis' gardener marks his place in the social standings of Wisteria Lane and situates him close enough to witness the gradual breakdown of Carlos and Gabrielle's marriage. From his position as an outsider John recognizes where the faults in the marriage lie and attempts fill any void left by Carlos. We witness John as he tries desperately to win Gabrielle's heart through methods that only emphasize his status as a teenager, such as offering his low-limit credit card to satisfy her shopping habit, stating that he will start his own gardening business to provide for them, and even purchasing an engagement ring and proposing to her on hearing that she may be pregnant. Although his intentions are honorable and we witness Gabby give serious thought to his propositions, John lacks the status, the power and the sense of security offered by Carlos.

The social differences between Carlos Solis and John are made explicit through the contrast of visual signifiers such as material possessions and differences in attire. As is the way Mike Delfino is contrasted against Susan's ex-husband Karl, John is often



framed sweeping alongside flash cars, or gardening outside the Solis mansion as a way to further emphasize the differences between the two men. Ironically, the Solis' mansion, represents Carlos's wealth and power, while at the same time providing a space from which Gabby can both watch John as he works and subsequently engage in the affair. Whereas Susan is framed as watching Mike through windows, Gabrielle is positioned significantly higher than John as she watches him from the safety of the second story of her mansion. The framing of these shots again make subtle reference to fairytale tradition. Gabby is positioned as the heroine who is trapped in her castle and needs to be saved, with John constructed as the knight in shining armor and the only man who can rescue her. As is the case in many fairytales the couple face an obstacle preventing them from being together, with the distance between John and Gabrielle here marking a distance indicative of both their age difference and Gabrielle's restriction through marriage.

As with Mike Delfino, John's body is often put on display as a result of his being employed within the realm of physical labor. Richard Dyer discusses the risk of emasculation of the male body on display; however, here the act of physical labor is used to reinforce a masculine position. John's tanned and muscular body is a space onto which Gabrielle projects her forbidden desire. We can make comparisons between John's place within the *Desperate Housewives* narrative and Steve Cohan's discussion on *Picnic*'s Hal Carter (William Holden) as has been presented earlier in this thesis. Like Hal, John is presented bare-chested and although his muscular body signifies phallic superiority; it also symbolizes a preoccupation with physical labor, which in turn marks his social inferiority. As suggested by Cohan, this lack of status positions John's body as purely

sexual, encoding it with what Laura Mulvey has previously termed 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

John's body connotes various meanings dependent on the stage of his relationship with Gabrielle. While attempting to seduce John it is Gabrielle who plays the aggressive role, however, in moments of passion the alignment of their toned, tanned bodies marks a sense of equality between the pair. After sex, John's ability to satisfy Gabrielle reinforces his heroic status and as she lies enveloped in his arms his size and temporary power over her are made explicit. It is at this point that both John and Gabby have what they want - he is with the woman he desires and she is momentarily satisfied. In the show's second episode we see this moment of passion and equality disrupted as Carlos arrives home from work unexpectedly. The scene shifts rapidly from a relaxing bath together to Gabrielle dragging John down the stairs and forcing him out the window in an almost disciplinary fashion. John's vulnerability is reasserted here through both his nakedness and his being repositioned back in his place of work. This short scene aids in reestablishing reality for the pair through reinforcing Gabrielle's power and John's social position. He is the object of her desire- the desperate fantasy in a world where her reality looks good from the outside but lacks passion and companionship.

John Roland occupies the position of Gabrielle Solis's desperate fantasy. The pair, much like Charlotte Vale and Jerry Durrance in *Now, Voyager*, share a strong bond although the sanctity of marriage permits them from engaging in public relationships. Although John cannot support Gabrielle financially (an area which further proves of vast

importance in later seasons), he provides for her on both an emotional and a sexual level. Gabrielle reinforces this for us in the pilot episode when she justifies her relationship with John as being “because I don’t want to wake up one morning with a sudden urge to blow my brains out” [1:1].

As the season progresses, so too does John Roland’s character. He becomes more confident both in his actions and his intentions, and begins to assert more power over Gabrielle. By embarking on a casual relationship with Danielle Van de Kamp, John is able to both evoke jealousy in Gabby and test her affections. The season’s final episode shows John at the height of his confidence as he arrives at Carlos’s court hearing and reveals the truth about his affair with Gabrielle. The irony surrounding this scene is that now it is Carlos who is in the vulnerable position of being on trial, and John who holds the greater authority. John’s confidence reaches its peak as he taps Carlos on the back in a manner suggesting friendship or equality of some description, and whispers, “Didn’t you think it was strange that you had the only lawn on Wisteria Lane that needed to be mowed three times a week” [1:23]? Positions of power are compromised as John is finally able to stand up to Carlos through an ironic reference back to his lower-class occupation.

## **‘The Briefcase’**

Heroes struggle for success, recognition, and supremacy.

(Joan Mellen 1978, p20)

With the term ‘housewife’ used as a key signifier for *Desperate Housewives*, it is no surprise that desperation in this context stems from the realities of having a working husband who often underestimates his wife’s capabilities, due to his limited time at home. ‘The Briefcase’ is a man dedicated to his job and as a result spends most of his day in business attire; deviating from these repetitions only on the rare occasions he spends a day with his family. What is interesting to note about ‘The Briefcase’ is that his heroic status and professional power diminish throughout the course of the narrative. This man is at his peak, both professionally and emotionally, at the beginning of the season. He is most secure in issues surrounding work and business and struggles to deal with the unfavorable realities of home such as marital struggles, money problems or health issues.

## **Rex Van de Kamp- ‘An Ironic Demise’**

He has all the attributes of the hegemonically masculine given his social status as a doctor, his perfect wife, obligatory one child of each sex, and his membership of an expensive and elite country club. But his failure to control his children, let alone his own health, undercuts his otherwise heroic status.

(Singleton 2006, p114)

Sometimes I joke that we could be doing exactly what we're doing, but if you called the show *Desperate Husbands* people might be a little more sympathetic to Rex. But that's just part of the package.

(Cherry 2005, p59)

The Van de Kamp family dynamic varies greatly depending on their location at any one time. To the outsider it is Bree who consistently dominates the household, with her effortless organization and flawless demeanor; however, the reality behind closed doors is much different. Right from the show's pilot episode, Rex Van de Kamp appears to alternate between the dominant patriarch and the submissive other, a two-fold position that is also indicative of his unorthodox sex life. Unlike Tom Scarvo, little reference is made to Rex's life outside of the home. We know he is busy and thus presume that his responsibilities as a doctor demand a large amount of his time. Despite being framed together at the dinner table, dinnertime at the Van de Kamp house is a period of tension and disharmony. Rex is sullen and distracted. He fails to participate in conversation and shows little interest in the lives of his wife and children.

The deterioration of the Van de Kamp marriage becomes one of *Desperate Housewives'* primary storylines and is mediated through regular marriage counseling sessions that are structured as a period of physical and emotional equality between the two characters. The reality outside of therapy however is presented as quite different. In public situations Rex appears almost emotionless. Visual representation of his character suggests a lack of involvement and investment in his marriage, an attitude that appears to have impacted

negatively on his children's behavior. Rex is often framed at a noticeable distance behind Bree, marking not only the estranged state of their marriage but also the lack of communication between the two. This estrangement is reinforced through their distance at the family dinner table where the children act as buffers between the two. The distance between Rex and Bree is made explicit in the show's pilot episode when the Van de Kamp family arrives at Mary-Alice's wake. Rex enters the Young's house a significant distance behind Bree, reducing him to the same level as the children. Whereas her exaggerated facial expressions at this point mark an attempt to salvage any remaining happiness in their marriage, Rex's lack of emotion is as that of a man who is frustrated with his situation and has given up hope. Any emotion revealed by Rex is that of dissatisfaction, heightened by his lack of understanding towards Bree's preoccupation with keeping up appearances.

Rex's relationship with his children transforms drastically over the course of the narrative. The children's lack of respect in the early stages of the season suggests that their opinion of Bree has been heavily influenced by their father. Rex's melancholy attitude and lack of contribution (outside of the obvious financial input) in comparison to Bree's perfectionist outlook positions him as more accessible in the eyes of the children. He often attempts to manipulate his children into siding with him, through both the presentation of extravagant gifts and the lack of consultation with Bree in matters concerning their well-being. Although joining forces with Bree over their son Andrew's misconduct in the later stages of the season, Rex lacks the ability to discipline and fails to intervene when the children disrespect her position as their mother.

On learning of Rex's infidelity, the dynamics of the Van de Kamp household can be seen to shift drastically. Faith in their mother is restored as the children react to their father's behavior with disgust and disappointment. Failing to take a dominant role in his own life, especially with matters concerning the discipline and respect of his children, Rex's fetish for sexual domination is an ironic inclusion in the narrative. Rex turns to his "sexual surrogate" Maisy Gibbons in order to fulfill an area in his life that Bree cannot satisfy. Rex's position as both a doctor and a family man are jeopardized when his infidelity and sexual fetishes become public knowledge, and it is at this point that Rex's position in his family, credibility in the community and his health all begin to deteriorate. This deterioration is paralleled by Bree's ability to manage the wayward children, maintain a sense of stability in her life, and (although for jealousy purposes) begins to date again.

Rex, much like *Bridget Jones' Diary's* Daniel Cleaver, falls victim to his own vulnerability as the narrative progresses. Rex's vulnerability stems primarily from his various health issues and is made reference to in the early stages of the season when he experiences a violent allergic reaction to onions. We see at this point that Rex is far from invincible and it is this physical vulnerability in combination with foul play (which will be discussed later when looking at George's character) that result in his eventual death. Although on first glance Rex appears to embody an ideal masculine position, from his perfect wife and two children to his country club membership and his position within the medical world, his inability to control both his family and his health undercuts his masculine position.

We can make comparison between Rex Van de Kamp and Michael Douglas's character Dan Gallagher in *Fatal Attraction*. Like Dan, Rex represents the traditional white, middle-class breadwinner who has jeopardized his own circumstances through partaking in infidelity. Whereas Dan's weakness is made explicit through his failure to kill Alex, Rex's weaknesses stem from his own body. As has been previously discussed, while Dan deterred from the nuclear family ideology through his adultery, when set against the delusional Alex he manages to represent a kind of normality. The same can be said when comparing Rex's issues to that of Bree's suitor, George who, although seemingly pleasant on first glance, soon shows signs of a more psychotic side. Rex's demise connotes what Stella Bruzzi describes as an "emasculating passivity" (p131). We can build on her ideas to conclude that Rex, like Dan fails to represent a masculine archetype that would be desired by male viewers. Rex's death in the season finale positions him at the pinnacle of his weakness.

Rex represents Bree's desperate reality, a position that she is constantly striving to conceal for the sake of keeping up appearances. She is bound in a marriage where all emotional and physical connection has been lost and her relationship with her children is strained due to Rex's negative attitude. Bree is seen to be constantly trying to strengthen the marriage whether it is through the reminiscing about happier times, the suggestion of counselling, or the reluctant agreement to sexual exploration. She is only able to escape her desperate reality with Rex on learning of his infidelity. This turning point aligns Bree's increasing strength and independence closely with Rex's deterioration. As he lies



on his deathbed we witness Rex's transformation from an arrogant patriarch to a helpless patient. Although gloomy, Rex's death provides Bree with an opportunity to escape the unfavorable realities of her life and move forward to seek the idyllic family lifestyle that she fantasizes.

### **Tom Scarvo- 'My Father the Hero'**

There is more than one leadership style. Mine is...quiet but effective.

(Tom Scarvo)

So often it's just assumed the man will be the breadwinner, and the woman will stay home. This country is filled with brilliant women who probably should be the breadwinner and men who should take over the housekeeping duties. But that's just not the way society looks at it.

(Marc Cherry 2005, p60)

While all other protagonist males are introduced into the *Desperate Housewives* narrative through the gathering at Mary-Alice Young's wake, Tom Scarvo is noticeably absent, a point that is largely indicative of things to come. This absence is made initially apparent through Lynette's lack of control over the four young children as they cause mischief and disrupt the wake. The implications of Tom's absence are heightened in the pilot episode as when we are introduced to him for the first time through a message left on his answer-

phone. Struggling with her children in the supermarket, a desperate Lynette calls Tom and vents her frustrations towards his absence. As her son Parker tries to alert her to his brother's mischief she responds with "Not now honey. Mommy's threatening Daddy" [1:1]. A statement such as this reinforces Lynette's frustration as well as offering us a taste of her authoritative character. Although the least enigmatic of the spouses, Tom's complications as a character lie in his preoccupation with work and his time spent away from home and the family. His unexpected arrival home in the pilot episode positions Tom as the quintessential father figure. Lynette's hard work is temporarily forgotten as Tom is presented as the novelty figure who has generously taken time out of his busy work schedule to return home and restore order and discipline. Framed in the doorway in a business suit with his boys positioned around him, Tom is a picture of perfect fatherhood. The ease with which he distracts the boys so he can have a moment alone with his wife directly contrasts with Lynette's struggle for discipline at the wake. Tom is momentarily presented as the picture of marital perfection as he leads Lynette to the bedroom for what looks to be pleasurable compensation for her hard work. This position is soon negated, as his hasty suggestion of unprotected sex marks for Lynette his failure to recognize her efforts at home and the demands of raising four young children.

In the third episode Tom asks Lynette, "Do you remember what it's like to work a sixty hour week?" [1:3] which not only frustrates her but also sets the scene for her desperation throughout the whole season. While other male character's professional lives are only made reference to in the show's narrative, Tom's life at work is often brought to the forefront of the storyline and is a common point of conflict within the marriage. Tom's

visual presentation reinforces his forced preoccupation with work and business. He is always either leaving to or returning from a hard day at work thus consistently clad in a navy business suit and tie. On the rare occasion we do see Tom in casual attire, the business side of this character is still visually present through the positioning of laptops, paperwork and other workplace signifiers.

The narrative and visual elements aforementioned reiterate Tom's struggle to find his place in the world. Biologically restricted from childbearing, Tom's default occupation is in the workforce, a place where, ironically, his wife Lynette is at her most comfortable. Tom and Lynette are forced into roles that they have not necessarily chosen and thus are often presented as unhappy in their lifestyles. We are with Tom as he experiences the highs of a looming promotion, the disappointments of being demoted, and the frustration of business trips forcing him to leave his family.

Unlike his male neighbors Rex and Carlos, Tom openly discusses his work with Lynette. It is on learning of Tom's position working with his ex-girlfriend that we experience home life intersect his place of work for the first time. Although Tom has nothing to hide, Lynette marks her presence as his wife through a series of random visits. Rather than criticize her protective actions, Tom embraces them and constantly reassures Lynette that their relationship is not at risk. Lynette's arrival in Tom's space appears somewhat invasive due to the lack of attention paid to his workspace in other points of the narrative, and so, on suggesting to Lynette that they host a business meeting in their home (1:7), he cannot understand her negative reaction. Tom's choice of location for the business

meeting reasserts his comfort and happiness in being at home. Lynette's reaction to this invasion of her space can be read as both her envy of Tom's place in the business world as well as a frustration towards his inability to recognize how hard she works.

It is during this business meeting that Tom's competitive streak comes to light. With Lynette turning her back on her success in the business world due to their plans for children, it is Tom who becomes the sole breadwinner for the family. When Lynette expresses her creative ideas to Tom's business partner we see his jealous, almost childlike side come through. His superiority has been undermined and the roles they have been forced to occupy become blurred. With his time at home limited, Tom strives to contribute to his family through success in the workforce, however, when his boss responds to Lynette's ideas favorably, his position is threatened and his resentment and jealousy is made obvious. This pressure of providing financially is intensified through the threat of emasculation. Tom's dedication to both his job and his family is reminiscent of film heroes such as *Die Hard's* John McLane and *24's* Jack Bauer. Although lacking exaggerated violence and suspense, *Desperate Housewives*, like many action-based narratives, is limited in its presentation of caring father figures. Tom, like Jack Bauer, takes his roles as both a dedicated professional and a caring father very seriously. Time spent away from the household is no indication of the passion each of these men has for their families.

Despite being intimidated by her potential as a businesswoman, Tom is hugely supportive of his wife when she endures tough times. He is the calm juxtaposed against her chaotic

lifestyle, which is made explicit through their contrasting responses to Bree spanking their son Porter [1:18]. Rather than criticize Lynette's messy house and scruffy appearance he compliments her ability as a mother and as a wife. Tom supports her during her addiction to A.D.D medication [1:9], agrees to fire the nanny after admitting he finds her attractive [1:11], sides with Lynette when his father is found to be having an affair [1:13], and keeps the spark alive in their marriage with Tarzan underwear [1:21].

It is not until the conclusion of the first season that Tom can fully extend his capabilities as a husband and father. On learning his ex-girlfriend has been awarded a promotion over him, Tom retaliates by quitting his job and announcing that he plans to become a stay-at-home dad. Having appeared to overcome any fear of emasculation, Tom initiates a traditional role reversal and Lynette return to work. It is for this reason that Tom occupies both Lynette's desperate reality and her desperate fantasy. For Lynette, desperate reality stems from the chaos and anxiety of being a stay-at-home-mum, a position that is heightened through a lack of understanding from Tom. Having a working husband is Lynette's desperate reality. By the end of the season Lynette's fantasy of rejoining the workforce becomes possible through Tom's resignation. Tom's decision to look after the children and the household repositions him as Lynette's desperate fantasy and the season concludes with us unsure of the outcome of this new dynamic.

### Carlos Solis- 'Locked (up) and Loaded'

I made over two hundred thousand doing business with him last year. If he wants to grab your ass, let him.

(Carlos Solis)

When a man buys a woman expensive jewellery there are many things he may want in return. For future reference, conversation ain't one of them.

(Carlos Solis)

standing confidently in front of his extravagant mansion in a business suit with his glamorous wife in tow, Carlos Solis is a picture of extravagance. Carlos's presentation as a man of power is reinforced primarily through his treatment of Gabrielle as an accessory. With all visual and narrative signifiers pointing towards wealth, it is not surprising when Carlos's first words in the pilot episode reinforce this notion- "If you talk to Al Mason at this thing I want you to casually mention how much I paid for your necklace" [1:1].

Much like Tom Scarvo, Carlos's preoccupation with his work is largely evident through his absence. We meet the Solis' at a point when their marriage is in trouble and are with Gabrielle as she finds temporary comfort in yoga, shopping, and ultimately engaging in an affair with another man. Carlos invests more time in his business deals than in his marriage and attempts to compensate through extravagant material gestures. Despite never witnessing Carlos in his place of work, business attire and discussion of deals and

transactions pervade the Solis household. As is the case with Mike Delfino, details surrounding Carlos's occupation are gradually revealed throughout the course of the narrative; with the delicate treatment of references to an offshore bank account and a man named 'Mr. Tanaka' lending towards notions of deceit and corruption. Carlos appears naive to the need for romance and emotional connection and thus is oblivious to Gabrielle's infidelity for a large portion of the season.

Carlos's preoccupation with wealth and status is evident largely through the way he is contrasted with John on both a physical and an emotional level. This comparison is made explicit in the show's first episode. The scene opens with the camera panning past an array of valuable ornaments and artworks and stops with Carlos and Gabrielle arguing in the middle of a lavish dining room. The camera then pulls back and frames the couple from the perspective of John as he watches from the garden. The camera follows Carlos out to the front steps and the two men converse momentarily. Carlos stands on the step and is framed by the magnitude of his mansion, in contrast to John who is hunched over nursing a finger prick, surrounded only by a modest garden. Carlos's power is made explicit here and the social differences between the two men are brought to the forefront. As Carlos leaves Gabrielle shouts at him, "I really hate the way you talk to me", which is met by a response typical of his character, "And I really hate that I spent fifteen thousand dollars on your diamond necklace that you couldn't live without, but I'm leaning to deal with it" [1:1]. The seriousness of Carlos's character is balanced with the humor that the privileged audience gains from their knowledge of John and Gabrielle's affair. We are encouraged to silently mock Carlos rather than respect him. Gabrielle's relationship with

both Carlos and John is reminiscent of Roberta Glass's situation in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Like Roberta's husband, Gary Glass, Carlos treats Gabrielle as a possession and an accessory in his business transactions. Both men can satisfy their wives financially whilst failing to provide marital passion and emotional connection. The following statements reinforce the repeated use of this character type within the context of female desperation.

**Gary Glass:** "Tell the guy you're my wife because we put a sauna in the owners apartment and he's given us a great price"  
(*Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1988)

**Carlos Solis:** "If you talk to Al Mason at this thing I want you to casually mention how much I paid for your necklace"  
(*Desperate Housewives*, 2004)

In contrast John Roland, much like Des in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, relies on emotional connection and heartfelt gesture in order to 'get the girl'. Both men work in low paid jobs and are more physically appealing than their respective husband counterparts. These men provide the protagonist women with an outlet from the realities of their troubled marriages and succeed in satisfying them on both a romantic and a sexual level. Like Gary and Des, Carlos and John can both be defined by what the other lacks.



Over the course of the narrative Carlos occupies two very different positions of power and his personality is very much dependent on his location at any one time. In the beginning of the season we witness the aggressive side of his character. He is a man who is at his professional peak; he has wealth, status, and a beautiful wife and thus oozes power. Often, however, Carlos's power surfaces in an angry form and heated arguments become frequent in the Solis household. Carlos's aggression towards Gabrielle is intensified through their difference in size and the two are often framed in a way that reasserts this inequality. An example of this is when Carlos arrives home late from work [1:2], and Gabrielle expresses her frustrations at being constantly alone in the house. Carlos attempts to mend the situation through the presentation of expensive jewellery. Gabrielle's unexpected reaction to the gift evokes Carlos's angry side and he grabs her arms forcefully and demands that she explain herself. These situations position Carlos as arrogant, disrespectful and completely out of touch with his wife's needs. When Carlos becomes suspicious of Gabrielle's infidelity his anger gradually becomes apparent to the rest of the community. Rather than confront Gabrielle, Carlos attempts to exert his power and authority through violence and through a series of false accusations on his behalf, is soon labelled a 'gay-basher'.

In an ironic turn of events Carlos is arrested for fraud and embezzlement at the very moment Gabrielle is about to confess about her affair with John. This is a turning point in that Carlos is thrust into a position of passivity through the physical restraint of being arrested. As a prisoner Carlos lacks all the things that previously made him powerful- his money, his expensive business suits, the ability to use physical strength and having his

trophy wife by his side. He is forced to find inside of him calmness in order to win back the support of both the jury and his wife with whom he must reestablish a relationship in order to conceal evidence of his crimes. A middle ground for Carlos's character is found when the authorities allow him to return home under house arrest. Despite being back in his home environment and able to keep a close eye on his wife's actions Carlos is weakened through the restriction of an electronic surveillance device. Carlos's inability to leave the house or earn an income sees him emasculated in the eyes of both himself and his wife.

As Carlos sits at home plotting to uncover his wife's infidelity Gabrielle is forced into the workforce in order to continue satisfying her lavish lifestyle. Their financial trouble soon becomes community gossip as Carlos and Gabrielle begin to use their spa pool for bathing and washing clothes [1:16]. The comic treatment of this situation suggests for us that their financial troubles are only temporary and we are surprised by their ability to solve problems as a couple. Although connoted negatively, Carlos's arrest and home surveillance allows us to see a different side to his character. We see him desperately attempt to rekindle his relationship with his wife as well as restore his tarnished character. When Carlos's mother arrives at Wisteria Lane his sensitive side is made even more explicit. It is through his conversations with his mother that we begin to realize the full extent of his love for Gabrielle and his suspicions surrounding her affair with John.

In his article, "*Fat Fuck! Why Don't You Take A Look In The Mirror?*" *Weight, Body Image and Masculinity in Sopranos* Avi Santo discusses Tony Soprano's physical greed

as a metaphor for his corruption. Although not bearing the obvious physical similarities, we can make comparisons between Tony Soprano and Carlos Solis based on their engagement in illegal activities, their corrupt business transactions and their violent behavior. While issues surrounding greed are the main focus of Santo's article, he also considers the comparisons that can be made between Tony's behavior and that of a child. At various points in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative Carlos shows signs of behavior that can be deemed childlike, such as bullying the cable-guy [1:4] throwing a tantrum before Gabrielle's charity fashion show [1:9], and engaging in deceitful behavior such as tampering with Gabrielle's birth control pills [1:12]. It is these negative aspects to Carlos's personality that see him positioned as Gabrielle's 'desperate reality'. Carlos treats Gabrielle as though she is an accessory and thus their marriage lacks equality and passion. It is Carlos's behavior and arrogant lack of respect that heightens John's appeal and sees her pushed into his arms. In the season's final episode Carlos is at his most vulnerable as he sits in the courtroom awaiting his fate. This vulnerability is reinforced as John, an employee who once marked Carlos's status and authority, stands over him during the trial and whispers in his ear the details of the affair. This revelation sparks Carlos's rage once again and any composure gained during his house arrest is long forgotten. Carlos is arrested and as the episode closes, the fate of his relationship with Gabrielle is unknown.

## ‘The Bad Guy’

The peaceful façade of Wisteria Lane had recently been shattered. First by my suicide. And then by the discovery of a note among my belongings that suggested a suspicious reason for my desperate act.

(Mary-Alice Young)

It’s the age-old question isn’t it. How much do we really want to know about our neighbors?

Bree Van de Kamp

Surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to the figure of the “bad guy” in film and television. William Indick in his 2004 book *Movies and the Mind - Theories of the Great Psychoanalysts Applied to Film*, looks momentarily at the figure of the ‘villain’ in film, describing him or her as “typically immoral cads who satisfy their primal desires despite the negative outcomes of their victims” (p26). While this full designation does not necessarily apply, we can argue that various elements of this definition can be aptly aligned with ‘The Bad Guy’ in *Desperate Housewives*. These men are undoubtedly immoral, however, their crimes are more of a response to their own desperation rather than coming from an internal desire to kill in cold blood. ‘The Bad Guy’ is recognizable primarily through his ‘weirdness’ and can typically be found lurking in the shadows or

attempting to conceal a secret of some kind. The men in this category exude awkwardness through both their narrative and visual presentation and it is through their conservative appearances and plainness against the colorful backdrop of Wisteria Lane that leaves both their victims and their neighbors unsuspecting of their crimes.

### **Paul Young- 'Flawed Fatherhood'**

He had other things on his mind. Things below the surface.

(Mary-Alice Young)

If Paul Young is ever arrested for his two crimes, you could imagine the neighbors telling the news reporters "He was always sort of a weirdo." Pleasant-looking enough, he exudes an eerie quality that makes his neighbors uncomfortable. And rightly so. This is a man who buried a dead body in his pool and murdered Mrs. Huber with his bare hands.

(Marc Cherry 2005, p64)

As Mary-Alice reflects on her life in the pilot episode we see various images of Paul Young as a happy, family-oriented man. This reflection, in conjunction with other moments such as Paul's look of concern as the housewives discuss possible reasons for their friend's suicide, and his mysterious gaze down into the swimming pool, are

indicative of a family secret or mystery of some kind. It is the secret behind the transformation of Paul's character from friendly neighbor to malicious criminal that provides the fundamental storyline for the *Desperate Housewives* narrative.

We meet Paul Young for the first time in the present tense at his wife's wake. As he is greeted with a variety of baked goods from Bree Van de Kamp, Paul stands calm, like a husband in shock at his wife's sudden departure. His conservative exterior in combination with his lack of any visible emotions create for us a character who appears simplistic on first glance, however, is burdened with the complications of a family secret. Throughout the course of the season the corrupt side to Paul's character surfaces as he tries, desperately, to protect his family. Paul has an element of power and a privileged knowledge in that he is the only person who knows the truth behind Mary-Alice's suicide. Although the truth is only revealed to both the housewives and the audience in the finale episode, Paul's suspicious actions and his inability to mourn with his son Zach give an indication of the sinister nature of his character. Right from the pilot episode we are with Paul as he attempts to conceal a secret of some kind. As the narrative progresses we witness the heightening of his desperation and thus the increasing extremity of his crimes; he dumps a toy chest (later found to be containing a dead body), drugs his son to restrict his memories, and kills Martha Huber in order to protect his secret.

In a show priding itself on genre hybridity, we can understand Paul Young's character as a necessary injection of film noir into a show embedded heavily in soap opera tradition. He brings darkness to Wisteria's light and adds serious drama to a narrative defined

primarily by female gossip and entertaining chaos. Although academic literature on film noir is abundant, repetition situates lighting and mise-en-scene as the most distinguishable generic traits. Janey Place and Lowell Peterson use the term 'anti-traditional' (p18), to describe these stylistic elements suggesting that unorthodox key light shadowing and off-angle mise-en-scene compositions are the most recognizable indicators of film noir influence. These 'antitraditional' factors in conjunction with Brian McDonnell's suggestion that film noir is defined by subtle qualities of tone and mood help situate Paul Young in a film noir context. Wisteria Lane lacks the dark alleyways and sleazy bars commonly associated with a typical film noir setting, however, Paul's actions have a catalytic affect in that they evoke suspicion in other residents thus darkening both the tone and the mood. In their 1995 book, *Towards a Definition of Film Noir*, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton offer the following summary of film noir narrative,

The anxiety in film noir possibly derives from its strange plot twists than from its violence. A private detective takes on a dubious assignment: find a woman, eliminate a blackmail threat, throw someone off the track, and suddenly corpses are scattered across his path.

(pp23-24)

On integrating this definition with *Desperate Housewives* the show's film noir influence becomes explicit:

The anxiety in film noir possibly derives from its strange plot twists than from its violence. A private detective (**Mike**) takes on a dubious assignment: find a woman (**Deirdre**), eliminate a [blackmail] threat (**Paul**), throw someone off the track (**Susan**), and suddenly corpses are scattered across his path.

(pp23-24)

As is suggested by Place and Peterson key lighting and mise-en-scene are important to the construction of the film noir character. Paul goes about his business at night when the rest of the lane is asleep and thus is often framed in the shadows. In the show's pilot episode we see Paul digging up the bottom of his swimming pool and although we are unaware of his motivations at the time, the darkness and eerie silence reinforce for us his sinister actions. In the next episode we are reminded of this. The camera tracks over the hole in the swimming pool and cuts to Paul carrying a large toy chest into a dimly lit garage. Once again the non-diegetic music in combination with a hooting owl offer a sense of corruption to a scene based largely on visual signifiers. This mise-en-scene and style is repeated frequently throughout the narrative and we learn more about Paul's character through his visual actions and (often violent) reactions, rather than his narrative involvement.

We can understand Paul Young's contribution to the dramatic elements of *Desperate Housewives* through a direct comparison to Susan Mayer who brings comedy and clumsiness to the narrative. While Paul and Susan both commit serious crimes in the show's first season, the treatment of and attitude towards these events are vastly different



and can be understood as paying homage to various film and television genres. When Paul kills Martha Huber viewers are shocked. The drama surrounding his attempts to frame Mike and conceal evidence are heightened through the use of a dark setting and a spooky soundtrack. When Mike learns of Paul's criminal activity his response is far from comic. In typical noir fashion He is dragged to the desert with his hands bound and a gun to his head. The seriousness of Mike's character here is largely indicative of the show's serious treatment of Paul's crimes. In comparison, Susan's 'crime' reflects the lightheartedness of soap opera and is dealt with in a humorous, almost unbelievable fashion. The loss of Edie's house is treated as simply a means to which Susan can confirm Mike's relationship status. As Gabrielle, Lynette, Bree and Susan stand and watch Edie's house burn in the pilot episode, the mood is momentarily somber. When Mike arrives to the scene the mood immediately lightens and Susan seems to have forgotten the fire all together.

**Mike:** Wow. What happened?

**Susan:** Mike!

**Mary-Alice [narrator]:** And suddenly there he was. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

**Susan:** I thought you were...ah...where were you?

**Mike:** I just got back from the movies. So Edie had a fire huh?

**Susan:** Yeah. But she's fine now. Everything's fine now.

**Mary-Alice [narrator]:** And just like that Susan was happy.

Life was suddenly full of possibilities.

The ironic combination of sound and visual imagery is explicit here. As Mary-Alice summarizes the episode for us (above), the camera pulls back to a long shot of Edie's house burning with Mike and Susan standing in the lower half. Rather than a dark and gloomy soundtrack indicative of loss, the scene is accompanied by a romantic orchestral piece. Despite the magnitude of the burning house in this shot, we cannot help but focus on the couple and the possibility of heterosexual romance. Susan's crimes are dealt with a soap opera audience in mind. As stated in chapter one, Cantor and Pingree believe that the secret to soap opera content lies in its anticipated viewer: "The content of soap opera reflects its intended audience. The stories are women's stories, focusing on love, romance, childbearing, health and illness, manners and morals" (p28). In contrast Borde and Chaumeton describe film noir's impact on the audience: "The moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are all the true emotions of contemporary film noir" (p25). While Susan's character can be aligned closely with soap opera convention, Paul is very much a product of film noir influence. Paul's function as a dramatic character is integral to the generic hybridity of *Desperate Housewives* and is made explicit when compared to the comedy and light-heartedness surrounding Susan and her female counterparts.

Bridging these two generic influences is the character of George Williams. George, Wisteria's local pharmacist, enters the *Desperate Housewives* storyline at a point when Bree is attempting to make her husband jealous. Much like Paul Young, George appears initially to be a regular sort of a guy. He spends his days working in the local pharmacy, makes polite conversation with customers, and goes home. Throughout the course of the narrative, however, a dark side to George's character is revealed. He soon develops an unhealthy obsession towards Bree, resulting in stalker activity and criminal actions.

George's character can be understood primarily through comparison to Rex. In George's mind, Rex represents the masculine heterosexual ideal- he is a successful doctor with a large house and a beautiful family- and it is this jealousy that prompts the malicious side of his character. George resembles a potential 'desperate fantasy' for Bree in that he offers her compassion and companionship outside of her troubled marriage. When Rex dies in the season finale we are left wondering if he will ever be given the opportunity to occupy this position fully, or if Bree will discover his crimes, forcing him to potentially exit the narrative altogether. George not only adds to the show's generic hybridity he himself is also a hybrid character. He injects comedy into *Desperate Housewives* through a series of awkward events during his dates with Bree (shooting himself in the foot at the gun club [1:12], getting an erection at the mini golf park [1:22]), but at the same time adds to the more dramatic elements of the narrative through his lies about having a girlfriend [1:20]), his snooping in Bree's bedroom [1:18] and finally his murdering Rex through his tampering with his heart medication [1:22].

Although Paul Young and George never encounter each other during the course of the narrative they are similar in that, ironically, their crimes and deceitful behavior are ultimately a response to their own personal desperation, pointing to a whole new area of discussion. The 'bad guy' in the *Desperate Housewives* narrative, although excluded in Brian Singleton's essay, brings to light the key themes of this thesis- generic hybridity and female desperation.

The men in *Desperate Housewives* should not be overlooked. Their actions and/or reactions have a catalytic affect on the female characters thus locating them within the 'desperate reality' and 'desperate fantasy' binary previously discussed. Through comparing the narrative and visual representation of the men in *Desperate Housewives* to the men in the woman's films throughout history (*Now, Voyager, An Unmarried Woman, Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *Bridget Jones' Diary*), we can essentially map the history of the 'desperation' and emphasize the value of these male characters in defining such a term.

## I. Conclusion

‘Desperation’ is not a new concept, however, with the arrival of *Desperate Housewives* to our television screens in 2004, this term has been brought to the forefront and considered critically for the first time. This thesis reminds us of this term’s presence in film and television history and situates ‘desperation’ within the context of contemporary woman’s genres. While an initial reading of the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* suggests a narrative preoccupied with female issues, the ‘Garden-of-Eden’ references can also be understood as signifying a narrative in which the male characters play an integral role. With the exception of Brian Singleton’s brief essay, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’s collection *Reading Desperate Housewives- Beyond the White Picket Fence*, fails to take into account the vast importance of the male characters and their catalytic impact on female desperation.

### Narratives of Desperation

This thesis has effectively set up the necessary frameworks to define ‘desperation’, and has situated the term within the context of the women’s genres described in chapter one. ‘Desperation’ here, has been broken down into two key categories- ‘desperate realities’ and ‘desperate fantasies’- with each of the female protagonists - Susan Mayer, Lynette Scarvo, Bree Van de Kamp and Gabrielle Solis - shown to occupy these positions at various points in the narrative. Using *Now, Voyager, An Unmarried Woman, Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Bridget Jones Diary* as case study examples this thesis defines the parameters of a narrative of desperation, tests the ‘desperate realities’ and ‘desperate fantasies’ model, and argues that desperation in film and television does not exist without

the inclusion of male characters who are considered here to be the fundamental catalysts for desire, victimization, and suffering for females.

### **Genre, Gender, and *Desperate Housewives***

This thesis situates *Desperate Housewives* within the realm of genre and gender, engaging primarily with soap opera's influence by melodrama and the woman's film, the appeal of soap opera to female audiences, and the configuration of soap opera as a women's genre. Having investigated the place of male characters in film and television from both a narrative and a visual perspective, this thesis recognizes that the generic hybridity of *Desperate Housewives* allows for the consideration of the male characters, making their stories more prominent and bringing their actions and anxieties to the forefront.

With a summary of the pilot episode of season one of *Desperate Housewives* provided to reference this thesis has engaged critically with McCabe and Akass's collection, thus making way for a detailed textual analysis that effectively highlights the importance of male characters and identifies them as integral part of a 'desperation' narrative such as *Desperate Housewives*.

### **Future Research**

Future research could firstly test this desperation model against other contemporary television narratives such as *Sex and the City* and *The Gilmore Girls*. Secondly, the desperation model could also be applied in other genres centered on a male villain of

some description. When researching the third section of my textual analysis, 'The Bad Guy', it became apparent that little research has been done on the male villain in film and television. This suggests that we could take the desperation model discussed here and reverse it, looking primarily at men who commit crime in response to their own anxiety, victimization and suffering, thus situating them within their own desperation narrative.

In preparing this thesis I have followed the University of Melbourne Harvard System,  
[http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/cite/harvard\\_dis/](http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/cite/harvard_dis/)

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- Desperately Seeking Susan, 1985. Film. Directed by Susan Seidelman. USA: MGM.
- Die Hard, 1988. Film. Directed by John McTiernan. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Dynasty, 1981. TV, USA: Aaron Spelling Productions.
- Edward Scissorhands, 1990. Film. Directed by Tim BURTON. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Fatal Attraction, 1987. Film. Directed by Adrain LYNE. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Gilmore Girls, 2000. TV, USA: Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions.
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- Mean Girls, 2004. Film. Directed by Mark WATERS. USA: Paramount Pictures.
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- Prison Break, 2005. TV, USA: Rat Entertainment.
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## **I. Appendix**

### **Episode Summaries**

#### **Episode One: Ah, But Underneath**

Susan and Edie compete for Mike's attention. Gabrielle responds negatively to Carlos's material gestures for the first time. Bree and Rex begin couples therapy. Mrs. Huber suspects Susan's involvement in Edie's house fire. The girls debate telling Paul about the threatening note Mary-Alice received. Paul dumps a toy chest into a lake.

#### **Episode Two: Pretty Little Picture**

The girls remember a dinner party organized by Mary-Alice before she died and decide to hold it in her honour. Bree and Rex's marriage troubles are made public knowledge. Susan and Karl bicker. Having been caught with John by the little girl next door, Gabrielle is forced to bribe her with a new bicycle. Lynette expresses to Tom the struggles of being a stay-at-home-mother. Zach finds the gun that Mary-Alice used to shoot herself.

#### **Episode Three: Who's that Woman?**

Lynette contemplates putting her twins on ADD medication. Mrs. Huber attempts to blackmail Susan with her knowledge of the house fire. Carlos suspects Gabrielle is cheating and beats up the wrong man. Rex moves to a motel and Bree struggles to deal with Andrew's rebellious behaviour.

**Episode Four: Come in Stranger**

Susan is asked out by a local cop on reporting a suspected neighbourhood break-in. Bree and Zach bond as she reassures him that he is not responsible for his mother's suicide. Lynette and Tom go to great lengths to get their children accepted for private school. Carlos's mother comes to stay forcing Gabrielle to make her affair with John more discreet.

**Episode Five: Running to a Stand Still**

Gabrielle uses her knowledge of Mama Solis' gambling addiction as a way to distract her from the affair. Lynette succumbs to the pressure of organizing the school production and takes her son's ADD medication. Bree attempts to spice up her marriage by visiting Rex in his motel room.

**Episode Six: Anything You Can Do**

Susan and Mike's first date is interrupted by an old friend of his named Kendra. Edie and Susan follow Mike and Kendra to a rodeo-themed bar to spy on them. Mama Solis photographs Gabrielle and John in a passionate moment but is hit by Andrew's car before she can tell anyone. Lynette hosts a dinner party for Tom's work colleagues.

**Episode Seven: Guilty**

Bree and Rex hide Andrew's car to conceal the evidence of Mama Solis' hit and run. Susan finds a gun and a large amount of cash in Mike's kitchen. Lynette is addicted to

ADD medication and breaks down about the hardships of motherhood in front of her friends. Paul murders Mrs. Huber on learning that she is Mary-Alice's blackmailer.

### **Episode Eight: Suspicious Minds**

Susan discovers the truth about Gabrielle and John's affair. Feeling guilty about Mama Solis's accident. Gabrielle decides to host a charity fashion show. Bree frames Andrew for possessing marijuana. Lynette poaches a nanny from another family. Carlos is arrested. Zach, who is hiding in Julie's room believed he killed his younger sister, Dana.

### **Episode Nine: Come Back to Me**

Lynette installs a surveillance system to spy on the nanny. Zach interrupts Susan and Mike's rendezvous. Carlos asks Gabby to burn his corrupt paperwork but she burns his passport instead, Rex has a heart attack while at Maisy Gibbon's house. Bree learns of their affair.

### **Episode Ten: Move On**

Gabrielle begins promotional modeling to pay the bills. Bree asks out local pharmacist, George Williams in an attempt to make Rex jealous. Tom is aroused when he accidentally catches the new nanny, Claire, naked. Mrs. Huber's sister Felicia Tillman arrives in Wisteria Lane and tells Edie she believes he was murdered.. Paul attempts to frame Mike for Mrs. Huber's murder.

**Episode Eleven: Every Day a Little Death**

Susan confesses to Edie that she burned down her house. George accidentally shoots himself in the foot while on a date with Bree. Carlos, while on house arrest, tampers with Gabrielle's birth control pills in an attempt to get her pregnant. Lynette lies about her son's health to get into a popular yoga class. Mike's boss, Noah, tells him to move quicker in his investigations.

**Episode Twelve: Your Fault**

Susan tries to interrogate Paul about Dana's death. John's parents ask Gabrielle to convince him to go to college. George begins to tamper with Rex's heart medication. Tom learns his father is having an affair.

**Episode Thirteen: Love is in the Air**

Mike's gun-shot wound is revealed on Susan and his Valentine's Day dinner. Gabrielle is fired from her modeling job and is employed in a cosmetic department. Felicia Tillman realizes that Mary-Alice Young is her old work colleague, Angela Forrest. Mrs. Huber's jewellery is found in Mike's garage sparking suspicions.

**Episode Fourteen: Impossible**

Mike is arrested for Mrs. Huber's murder and Susan learns of his previous convictions. Zach throws a pool party for the other kids on Wisteria Lane. Justin, Gabrielle's new gardener attempts to blackmail her. Bree suspects Danielle is planning to have sex with

John. Lynette goes to Tom's workplace and jeopardizes his promotion. Noah pulls some strings to get Mike released from jail.

### **Episode Fifteen: The Ladies Who Lunch**

After Maisy Gibbon's is arrested for prostitution, Bree tries to convince her to remove Rex's name from her client list. Paul attempts to convince Felicia that Mike was Mrs. Huber's murdered. Susan and Edie get drunk and break into Paul's house to look for evidence to use against him. Lynette's children are accused of contaminating the school with head lice.

### **Episode Sixteen: There Won't be Trumpets**

Mama Solis awakens from her coma but dies soon after from falling down the stairs. The hospital offer Gabrielle a vast sum of money for negligence. Lynette befriends a deaf woman. Rex and Bree send Andrew to a behavioral camp. Mike sends Susan a letter in an attempt to explain his mysterious behaviour.

### **Episode Seventeen: Children Will Listen**

Andrew tells Bree and Rex that he thinks he is gay. Bree baby-sits the Scarvo children and spans Porter, much to Lynette's disgust. Carlos forces pregnant Gabrielle to sign a prenuptial agreement. Susan's mother Sophie comes to Wisteria Lane.

**Episode Eighteen: Live Alone and Like It**

Lynette becomes friends with her grumpy neighbour, Karen McClusky. Bree invites the local minister to dinner to talk Andrew out of his homosexuality. Mike realizes that Paul Young was involved in Deidre's murder. John lends Gabrielle his credit card.

**Episode Nineteen: Fear No More**

Zach becomes obsessed with Julie. Lynette becomes jealous of Tom's working relationship with his ex-girlfriend, Annabel. Susan's kitchen catches on fire. Through the use of flashback we learn that Zach is the son of a troubled drug-addict that Mary-Alice used to work with.

**Episode Twenty: Sunday in the Park with George**

Susan's mother reunites with her partner, Morty. Gabrielle tells John she is pregnant and that he might be the father. Lynette attempts to spark up her and Tom's sex life with costume. Susan learns out more about Mike's dangerous past.

**Episode Twenty-One: Goodbye For Now**

Mike and Susan decide to move in together. Carlos beats up Justin thinking that he is having an affair with Gabrielle. Lynette jeopardizes another of Tom's work promotions. George attempts to break Bree and Rex up for good.

**Episode Twenty-Two: One Final Day**

Carlos goes to prison on charges of assault. Mike finds out the truth from Paul about Deirdre's death. Tom decides to become a stay-at-home father and let Lynette go back to work. Rex dies of a heart attack.